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Preface

In December 2009, the journal of the American History of Science Society, *Isis*, published a review by Nick Hopwood of Robert Richards' biography of Ernst Haeckel, *The Tragic Sense of Life*. The current issue of *Isis*, [December 2010] features a letter to the editor I have written reacting to Hopwood's review and Hopwood's reply to my letter. The editorial rules of *Isis* governing letters to the journal's editor conclude the discussion at this point. What appears below therefore is a response to Hopwood's reply to my letter.

[Click here to see the original ISIS correspondence.](#)

Reply to Nick Hopwood's response to my letter in *ISIS*, concerning his review of Robert J. Richards's biography of Ernst Haeckel

The trouble with Nick Hopwood's response to my letter in *Isis* [Dec. 2010] is that he not only fails to indicate any source material that would confirm his positive evaluation of Richards' biography of Haeckel, but he also neglects to heed the insights of his hero Karl Marx who noted in the *Critique of Political Economy* that an opinion of an individual should not be based on what he thinks of himself.¹ Hopwood should have evinced skepticism about Haeckel's empty boast in the [Hermann Bahr Interview](#) that he was free of the prejudice of anti-Semitism, but like Robert Richards, he naively touts Haeckel's deceptive and fleeting avowal of philo-Semitism as a reliable guide to what Haeckel actually believed. At the same time, and inconsistently, Hopwood departs from the positions taken in his original review, and apparently now disagreeing with Richards who denies Haeckel's anti-Semitism totally, stumblingly

¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Chicago: Kerr, 1904; 'Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself....' [12].

admits that Haeckel did in fact harbor some anti-Semitic and proto-Fascist tendencies, thus inadvertently seeming to give more credence to my evaluation of Haeckel than to that of Richards. These conflicting, muddled revelations surface in Hopwood's comments and his general summary of the Bahr Interview, like that of Richards, remains distorted and misleading, a response falling nothing short of fantasy in its apparent lack of familiarity with Haeckel's actual convictions. Overall, Hopwood's remarks reflect the perilous trends that have come to define much of the recent scholarship on Haeckel, a mode of research that is burdened with left-wing ideological biases that have remained frozen in time since the demise of the GDR – ideas that continue to haunt Hopwood – and which recombine with atavisms that are echoed in contemporary right-wing reactionary Germanic and nationalistic discourse. These ostensibly opposing perspectives, perhaps not surprisingly, cohabit comfortably and nurture endless and often irrational outbursts of ersatz scholarship and menacing political opinion.

First of all, and as I have already suggested, the Bahr Interview did not, as Hopwood paradoxically suggests, balance off expressions of Haeckel's philo-Semitism with anti-Semitism. On the contrary the overwhelming content of the Interview features an extended diatribe against the Jews, comments that were denounced in the German Jewish press at the time as dangerous racially motivated anti-Semitic opinions emanating from a respected and influential scientific authority. The few lines of praise for some of Haeckel's Jewish acquaintances at the outset of the Interview ran along the lines of 'some of my best friends are Jews,' and then were promptly annulled when the emphasis shifted to support for the international anti-Semitic movement and praise for the positive historical role of anti-Semitism in Germany and everywhere else as well. Just as Richards has badly misrepresented the bulk of the Interview by literally leaving out all of its anti-Jewish content, Hopwood resorts to the same unfortunate tactic of selective reporting. It means nothing to show that Haeckel was friendly with a handful of highly assimilated German Jews; the same could be said of the early career of Hitler, when as a drifter, he befriended a number of Jews in Vienna and they weren't even assimilated. The important proof of Haeckel's anti-Semitism lies in his general Monist theory of history and his appraisal of the place of the Jews as a distinct biological race in evolutionary development. The foundations of Haeckel's anti-

Semitism can be located in this latter realm of conjecture. According to Haeckel, due to a hereditary and damaging trait rooted in the power of the Biogenetic Law which sets down racial characteristics for all time, the Jews in the ancient world, and in opposition to progressive Ionian pre-Socratic Monism, advanced a destructive dualistic religious view of the world which has been sustained into Modernity. Judaism, Haeckel contends, is an anti-evolutionary and anti-natural religion that has to be defeated at all costs and replaced by a secular Monist faith rooted in natural evolutionary laws. With the disappearance of the Jews the health of mankind would be restored and the physical and psychological well-being, especially of the Aryan Germans, would be assured for all time.

Since Hopwood along with Richards considers Haeckel to be a friend of the Jews² he should recall that philo-Semites are not ordinarily known to consider anti-Semitism an admirable and justifiable movement, as Haeckel did in his remarks to Bahr, nor plead for the disappearance of the Jews as a separate group of people and advocate the deliberate dissolution of their unique cultural and religious identity and heritage. Nor do philo-Semites consider the Jews to be completely at fault for their own persecution as Haeckel insisted when he exonerated the non-Jewish world for any actions inaugurated against the Jews. For Haeckel, and this he stated explicitly, the Jews have suffered only what they deserved throughout history. As long as Hopwood [and Richards] obscure the greater part of the content of the Bahr Interview, all their clarifications about the subject carry no weight and any claims made of the existence of Haeckel's philo-Semitism are absolutely unsubstantiated!

In response to my question as to what convinced Hopwood that Richards is correct about Haeckel's philo-Semitism and aversion to Fascist-like ideas, Hopwood's enthusiastic embrace of Richards' explanation of how he arrives at his conclusions about Haeckel is astonishing from both a methodological perspective as well as from a disconcerting failure to provide corroborating evidence for what is being argued. It is difficult to understand how Hopwood can be impressed by Richards' conclusion that Haeckel was hardly interested in the Jews and the Jewish question which Richards explains was arrived at by digital analysis, counting the number of words and lines in Haeckel's works that mention the Jews and

² '*Judenfreundschaft*' is the preferred label that Richards attaches erroneously to Haeckel.

then comparing them with the relatively greater number of comments in Haeckel's writings that negatively reflect upon Christianity. Hopwood and Richards seem to be confusing the limitations that often are imposed on archeologists who seek to decipher pitifully sparse evidence surviving from vanished civilizations with an appraisal of a writer whose collected works are completely extant and readily available to the historian. It is hard to grasp how Richards and Hopwood can offer such a jerry built defense of their research method that not surprisingly results in achieving only blatantly specious assumptions about Haeckel's beliefs. Worthy of mention is the fact that Richards, apart from the opening paragraphs of the Bahr Interview, fails to indicate that whatever Haeckel had to say about the Jews was invariably derogatory and he deletes all the available anti-Semitic comments by Haeckel. In addition, Richards [and Hopwood's] insistence that Haeckel was more anti-Christian than anti-Semitic is an invalid assessment, because for Haeckel, Christianity was an invention and extension of Judaism. When Haeckel denounces Christianity he is automatically charging the Jews who, like the Christians, are guilty of separating man from nature and imposing an anti-natural dualistic religious code on European civilization.³

Haeckel's general ideas about the Jews, in other words, are readily accessible, but Richards seems neither capable nor willing to undertake an analysis of their meaning or confront their possible anti-Semitic content. The Jewish people for Haeckel, as has been indicated, are a distinct biological entity,⁴ in essence both a superior and inferior race, a people that must disappear because they endanger the biological and philosophical foundation of European and world civilization. In defining the Jews as a race and not a religious or national group, Haeckel argues that the Jewish question is not a religious issue but a scientific and evolutionary problem. *The Riddle of the Universe*, as an anti-Semitic tract, suggests this unmistakably if only Richards [and Hopwood] would take the trouble to decipher its meaning, a work that emphasized the danger of the international historical clash underway in the modern world between two

³ Hopwood seems unaware of the fact that for all his attachment to digital analysis Richards never mentions more than ninety percent of the Bahr Interview, leaving out of consideration sections where Haeckel denounces the Jews, defines the Jewish question as a racial problem, and praises the historical role of anti-Semitism.

⁴ Haeckel's statement in the Bahr Interview that the Jewish problem is primarily a racial question is explicitly denied by Richards when he states erroneously that Haeckel did not define the Jews in racial terms.

conflicting civilizations: Judeo-Christian dualism on the one hand and Aryan scientific Monism on the other hand. However, unlike for Hopwood and Richards' hermetically sealed minds, the book's anti-Jewish theme could not have been lost on Haeckel's contemporaries, a time when German society was steeped in anti-Semitism. *The Riddle of the Universe*, in addition, along with Haeckel's other writings, were not representative of standard nineteenth century works like that, for example, of Andrew White's classic *History of the Warfare between Science and Theology in Christendom* [1896]. White was not anti-Semitic and did not plead for the disappearance of the Jews, but rather recounted the struggle between conventional religious beliefs, on the one hand, and the need for unhindered scientific investigation, on the other hand. In contrast, Haeckel's book was a deliberately conceived polemic that elaborated upon the fundamental threat to mankind posed by the continued existence of the Jews and Judeo-Christian religion in general. In the light of this, the fact that Hopwood would be supportive of Richards' highly flawed analytical methodology is clear testimony to a failure to recognize commonly accepted axioms of historical research that should act as a firewall against the intellectual lapses that run rampant across the writings of Richards.

Furthermore, Hopwood should have been aware of the extensive corroborating literature provided by Haeckel's followers which also contributes to the ideological foundations of scientific anti-Semitism. Hopwood would do well to acquire a copy of the *Campagne nationaliste* [1902] by Jules Soury who was a prominent follower of Haeckel and a translator of many of his major works into French. Soury makes clear the nature of the Haeckelian Monist demand for the scientific destruction of the Jews – and highlights the true meaning of the anti-Semitic Monist revolution that it was understood Haeckel intended to foment. In addition to Soury, the same line of thinking can be found in many other Monist disciples of Haeckel as well as among many of his doctoral students. In the Bahr Interview Haeckel registered sympathetic understanding of his students' anti-Semitic sentiments and activities. All this is lost on Hopwood and of course also on Richards whose analysis is obsessed with unfounded reveries that celebrate Haeckel's ostensible philo-Semitism.

Just as Haeckel's declaration that he was not an anti-Semite is misguided self-appraisal, so too was his declared allegiance to pacifism an empty boast, simply an expression of self-flattery the meaning of which Hopwood falls for hook line and sinker. Haeckel's commitment to pacifism is about as convincing as the propagandistic claims of the erstwhile socialist states of Eastern Europe that they were the leaders among the 'peace-loving states' of the world and who flaunted membership in a host of 'peace' organizations and societies. In any event, the Monists understood pacifism to mean not universal peace among nations that were equal to one another, but rather signified a condition whereby peace would reign only after the attainment of German hegemony under the leadership of the Kaiser. As Alfred Fried, the self-proclaimed 'realistic' leader of the German Peace Society and a prominent Haeckelian Monist expressed it: 'one sees that the fable of "eternal peace" is not part of the pacifist program.'⁵ For Haeckel and Fried strong state power was a prerequisite for the realization of a peaceful world and that in general the struggle for existence could never be surmounted and was a natural constituent of historical reality. Warfare, therefore, was never ruled out as an operational possibility by Haeckel or his followers. 'Psychical struggle' was preferable to war but this did not by any means preclude reliance upon traditional military might in the interests of German imperial strength. Fried summed up the importance of maintaining state power when he noted approvingly that when an 'Apache kills a wanderer he is acting anarchically, but when a gendarme kills an Apache, that is [acceptable-dg] regulated power.'⁶ In addition, Hopwood [and Richards] should have mentioned, but they do not, that Haeckel was one of the founding members of the Pan-German League, an organization that supported the idea of Aryan predominance in German foreign policy to be realized by the forceful acquisition of empire. In addition, in *The Riddle of the Universe* as well as in his other writings, Haeckel clearly expressed support for the creation of a world-wide German Empire that was to be achieved according to social Darwinian principles that are as remote from pacifism as one can possibly get.

⁵ Quoted in Daniel Gasman, Introduction to Alfred Fried, *Handbuch der Friedensbewegung*, New York: Garland Press, 1972, 10. The Monist conception of pacifism which is markedly different from the standard understanding of pacifism as the total rejection of war is spelled out in more detail in this Introduction.

⁶ Ibid, 12.

Hopwood's reference to Haeckel as a Liberal Nationalist is also puzzling and apparently stems from a basic unfamiliarity with Haeckel's political convictions; a description of Haeckel that is hardly enlightening insofar as it fails to define exactly what manifestation of liberalism Hopwood is referring to. Does he mean the nineteenth century National Liberal political party in Germany? But Haeckel neither resembled the German National Liberals who did not denounce Christianity nor plead for the establishment of an authoritarian government in Germany as Haeckel did. The Liberal Nationalists came to support Bismarck because he agreed to foster economic protectionism for an expanding bourgeois economy, but for quite different reasons Haeckel admired Bismarck for supporting authoritarian political power and aggressive German nationalism. If Hopwood was referring to liberalism in a wider sense as the ongoing intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution then one must remember that Liberalism was greatly transformed by the closing decades of the nineteenth century. As Kevin Passmore has recently pointed out,⁷ liberalism toward the end of the nineteenth century came to accept more and more the precepts of racial social Darwinism and this therefore revealed not that Haeckel was influenced by liberalism but rather how much he had himself transformed the prevailing content of what liberalism had come to stand for. In actual fact, Haeckel explicitly denounced liberal principles like equality and freedom. This was also true of the leadership of the Monist League before World War I. Johannes Unold, a vice president of the League published one book after another denouncing liberalism and as he tellingly wrote: '[Liberalism] exaggerated the formal concept of freedom.' Instead of urging individuals to realize themselves by submitting to state power, liberals have always unfortunately manifested a 'fundamental hatred' of the benefits political authority.⁸

For another of Haeckel's prominent followers who was radically anti-liberal, Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Haeckel's Monism was the key to the political changes that would be inaugurated with Monism's victory, and he explained that its authority would serve to repudiate all the false hopes that had

⁷ Kevin Passmore, 'The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914,' in R.J.B. Bosworth (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 11-31.

⁸ Monist anti-liberalism is discussed in Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, London: Macdonald, 1971, 45 and passim

been aroused by the dreams of liberalism, as it accomplished the dissolution of the naïve ideals proclaimed by the French Revolution – a false historical episode that had given birth to a kind of shallow, secularized version of Christianity. The dawn of scientific society, on the other hand, would proclaim the naturally based Monist truths of ‘determinism, inequality, and selection,’ ideals that flowed from the inspired truths of the natural world and whose realization would decisively vanquish the liberal political illusions of ‘liberty, fraternity, and equality.’⁹

Similarly, Hopwood’s mention of the issue of the relationship between Haeckel and Socialism, like that of his grasp of Haeckel and liberalism, also lacks fundamental historical insight. Richards hardly discusses the topic, if at all – a serious shortcoming of his book – and Hopwood’s grasp of the intricacies between Haeckel, Marxism, and Social Democracy echoes only the propagandistic antiquated positivist-like mythology that was disseminated in communist East Germany. Classical Marxism and Nazism were antagonists, but were nonetheless closer to each other than to conventional Western Judeo-Christian civilization and the two movements shared a common historical framework of ideas: their relationship was symbiotic insofar as both stressed historical determinism, ethical relativism, and the idea of struggle in both society and nature. Many Nazis and Fascists began their careers as Social Democrats and on its radical fringes Marxism gave rise to the proto-Fascist ideas of Revolutionary Syndicalism, racial eugenics, and actual Nazi and Fascist programs. For example, Hopwood might want, for starters, to have a look at the well-known book, *Socialism and Modern Science* [1895], written by the Italian Marxist editor of *Avanti*, mentor of Mussolini, and later on Fascist supporter, Enrico Ferri, where Haeckel’s ideas and Monism are enthusiastically applied by Ferri according to his ‘Revolutionary Method’ in ways that revise Marxism in the direction of revolutionary syndicalism and help set the stage for the intellectual birth of Fascist ideology.¹⁰

If Hopwood, therefore, desires to initiate a new departure in scholarship that would provide more understanding of Haeckel’s true place in German history then he might consider whether it is possible to

⁹ See, for example, discussion about the political thought of Jules Soury and Georges Vacher de Lapouge in Daniel Gasman, *Haeckel’s Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology*, New York: Lang, 2008, Chapters 1 and 4.

¹⁰ See the analysis of Ferri’s Haeckelian inspired Marxism in *ibid*, chapter 8.

launch such an enterprise based upon the problematic content of Richards' scholarly writings as well as upon the conclusions of a slew of embarrassingly flawed reviews currently being disseminated by a small army of academic 'experts' on Haeckel.¹¹ The fact that Hopwood does not mention the myriad shortcomings of Richards' book such as the mistaken comparison between Haeckel's vision of life and Miguel de Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life*, Unamuno's book written not in tandem with Haeckel's beliefs as Richards suggests, but as a polemic against Haeckel's Monism; the whitewashing of the significance of Haeckel's racial eugenics and anti-Semitism; the failure to mention the significance of the connections between Haeckel's Monism and theosophy and occultism; Richards' silence concerning Haeckel's elaboration of precepts that resemble basic Nazi ideology like the idea that politics is applied biology; his untenable positive evaluation of the content and intellectual integrity of *The Riddle of the Universe*; and lastly Richards' unqualified praise of Haeckel's commitment to a host of untenable scientific theories should lead Hopwood to consider recalibrating his enthusiastic praise of Richards' biography.

¹¹ One can, for example, question the assessment of Jane Maienschein, the current president of the American History of Science Society, that Richards' biography of Haeckel represents 'brilliant scholarship.' Review of Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life in History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 2009.