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NAPOLEON AND LAMARCK

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Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), sire of modern evolutionary theory clashed with the strong personality and the pragmatic needs of Napoleon. The emperor viewed the class of intellectuals as tools to serve him and further the growth of the Empire. Like other dictators Napoleon could not tolerate dissent in the arts, sciences, and politics. Napoleon felt comfortable with Georges Cuvier's catastrophic theory as well as his administrative ability and appointed him the czar of the science and education ministries.

Lamarck's theory of gradualism differed from Cuvier's geological cataclysmic upheavals in his description of the development and changes on this planet. Lamarck based his central theme on the theory that there exists a natural tendency to geologically and biologically progress. However, in this period of time, in order to continue to publish and teach, scientific works had to be approved by Napoleon's supervisors of public morals. Also, the fear that the newly reached agreement with the Church might be damaged caused Napoleon to dissociate himself from those who advocated an anti-vitalistic attitude because it supported the controversial theory of spontaneous generation. The final coup de grace to Lamarck's career was the degree of Cuvier's persistent debasement of Lamarck's writings. This contempt helped to create a negative presupposition in the famous satrap's frames of reference. The building up of these inferences was one of the major causes for the Emperor to disgrace Lamarck by refusing to accept the great masterpiece, *Philosophie Zoologique*.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the underlying causes of an abrupt rejection by Napoleon of Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), the father of modern evolutionary theory.

Within the sociological framework of a totalitarian society, an individual's political and religious credentials can influence his academic recognition. During the period of the French Revolution and Napoleon's Reign, science

was focused by the politics of the era. As political leadership changed, so did accepted scientific thought.

Napoleon perceived himself to be a man of action controlled by destiny. Over a period of time he had evolved from a revolutionary to an absolute monarch, and from a materialist to a theist.[1] Among the basic components of his personality was a strong sense of the pragmatist. The intellectuals who appealed to Napoleon were those who applied art, science, and literature in a utilitarian manner to fulfill the destiny of France. These men were given positions of influence and power. One example is that during the Egyptian expedition, a team of scientists accompanied Napoleon and were richly supported by him. He hoped to acquire practical knowledge which would aid in unifying his polyglot domain.

The acceptance of knowledge from science and the arts does not imply that Napoleon was an admirer of the intellectual community. On the contrary, the Emperor has been quoted as describing the free-thinking ideologues as "a band of imbeciles."[2] Napoleon's need for immediacy caused him to dislike abstract ideas. In this vein, in 1804, his first Valet De Chambre notes that the Emperor cut short the prince archchancellor when the prince tried to espouse the metaphysics of Kant. The Little Corporal replied that, "Kant was obscure, and that he did not like him."[3] Not only did Napoleon dislike abstract ideas but he also had the need to shape and control the intellectual community. As Robert B. Holtman remarked in his book, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, "Money alone did not prove sufficient inducement to around the literati. Napoleon, therefore, gathered authors around himself at Saint-Cloud and charged Fontanes with locating writers susceptible of being influenced by the Emperor."[4]

The Napoleonic regime had inherited the matrix of an earlier era's accomplishments. The spirit of the early phase of the French Revolution encouraged development by providing financial support to a variety of scholars including the early psychologist, Cabanis ; the political economist, Germain Gardier ; and Lamarck, a scientist. Georges Lefebvre writes, "The sciences were flourishing in France because the Revolution had given them a prominent place in public education."[5] He continues further, "During the Napoleonic period, there was a strange slowing down of intellectual life. On the Continent, despotic governments made it their business to stop men's mouths."[6]

One of the major scientists of the time, Jean Baptiste Lamarck, appears to be the antithesis of all that Napoleon valued. Napoleon regarded Lamarck as both a scientific and political liability. Lamarck's early political heritage was based on a close relationship with the leaders of the Revolution. It

was this group who invited Lamarck, a fifty year old botanist, to fill a newly created professorship with a chair in invertebrate zoology. The multidisciplinary experience provided by this opportunity enabled Lamarck to synthesize the theory that slow gradual change was the primary cause of evolution in the plant and animal kingdoms.

Lamarck's scientific and personal opponent Baron Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) curried Napoleon's favor. Napoleon also discovered that he preferred Cuvier's political and administrative ability. Cuvier's political conservatism enabled him to offer complete loyalty to the rapidly growing despotic empire. Napoleon, to show his appreciation to a loyalist, rewarded Cuvier with a series of university and administrative appointments.

In addition to the personality clash, Lamarck's evolutionary theory of slow gradual change did not interface with Napoleon's perception of reality. Napoleon's rise to power had come through a series of political catastrophes. These incidents may have in a subliminal way directed Napoleon to overtly prefer Cuvier's version of geological evolution through the process of cataclysms.

After Napoleon acquired absolute power his political interest focused on the debate dealing with the doctrine of spontaneous generation. John Farley is quite right in saying that, "The French, through the writings of Lamarck, came to associate the doctrine of spontaneous generation with theories of transformism...This association with transformism, materialism, and the ideologues resulted in the politicization of the spontaneous generation controversy in nineteenth-century France....Not surprisingly French Catholics and other opponents of republicanism identified ideologie with atheism. Napoleon's successful association with the Catholic Church in opposition to atheistic revolutionaries and his public refutation of the ideologues, on whom he placed much blame for terreur of the Revolution, linked the doctrine of spontaneous generation with forces opposed to the stability and order of the French State"[7]. In short, the connotations and social applications of the spontaneous generation doctrine stirred Napoleon's wrath because it disturbed his want for a stable state.

Probably, the most objectionable area of Lamarck's scientific writings was his anti-vitalistic correspondence. Lamarck regarded life as a physical phenomenon. He wrote that the earliest forms of life were caused by special arrangements of inorganic compounds interacting with a gravitational force. Despite religious professions in much of his work, careful examination of his theories showed conflict with the religious establishment of his t ime. During this time frame, Napoleon was engaged in very sensitive negotiations with the Vatican to conclude a Concordat. There existed strong elements in government and the army who vigorously opposed these discussions. Napoleon

also had to placate residual anti-Catholic feelings the general population as a result of the recent Revolution.

In order to appease the clergy and attract support from the Catholic people, Napoleon had to control the Church in Western Europe. Henry H. Walsh has stated the following, "The Concordat of 1801 was for all intents and purposes the beginning of the Church's considered attempt to deal with the new problem that had been forced upon it by the French Revolution"[8]. In a similar vein, Albert Guerard concluded that, "The schism was ended ; the Catholic Church was officially recognized ; the clergy were to receive salaries from the State ; the Pope and the temporal ruler of France would in unison appoint the bishops ; the purchasers of Church property would be left undisturbed. Napoleon had wrested from the royalists their strongest asset : the support of Rome"[9]. Paul A. Gagnon confirmed, "Vital to Napoleon's interests was the Pope's concession to him of the power to name new bishops, who would then be consecrated by the Holy See"[10].

Lamarck's theory of gradualism acted as the connective tissue to link his biological and geological manuscripts. Gradualism tends to attenuate the instant power of a Divine Being. On the other hand, the catastrophic theory gives credence to the belief that the Supreme Being intervened in the recent Noachian Flood. Gradualism also extended the age of the Earth far beyond the accepted view of five thousand years. R. Hooykaas, Professor of the History of Science in the Free University, Amsterdam, has said the following, "It was the catastrophists (Cuvier, Buckland), not the evolutionists, that based their doctrine mainly on geology and paleontology. Lamarck founded his arguments especially on the scale of (now living) animals ; his geology did not influence his central idea of a tendency to progress, nor did paleontology come to the fore in his ***Philosophie Zoologique***"[11].

The most heinous charge that could be launched against the advocator of almost imperceptible steps of change was the less than subtle suggestion that Lamarck championed atheism. The fact that Lamarck was born a Catholic who studied at the Jesuit school at Amiens was ignored by his opponents. Shortly thereafter, Napoleon was still faced with the pressure of maintaining a delicate balance between the church, the state, and the army. A minor swing of the pendulum in any direction among this triad could cause major repercussions in the entire empire. It is safe to assume, that Napoleon must have regarded Lamarck as a potentially dangerous deviant thinker of dubious revolutionary background. History tells us whether justified or not, despots have exaggerated and morbid fears of those whose thoughts differ from their own.

Lamarck, lacking knowledge of psychohistory, attempted to present to

Napoleon his major work, *Philosophie Zoologique*. This magnum opus dealt with materialistic cause and effect in nature. In a fleeting moment Napoleon curtly rebuffed Lamarck by not accepting this historical and biological work. Knowledge of Napoleon's contemptuous behavior toward Lamarck spread throughout the scientific fraternity. This expression of disdain by Napoleon gave Cuvier the signal to terminate Lamarck's career by mocking him in the lecture room before the student body. Lamarck old and ill could not stand up to this barrage of ridicule and was forced to become a recluse. Lamarck was effectively banished from the academic community and died in obscurity. Attesting to this fact Robert Ernest Stebbins commented that, "More important, however, was the eulogy which Cuvier offered on Lamarck before the Academy of Seiences. This, apparently, was so bitter and so full of violent language that it was not even printed until after Cuvier's own death and then only after the more offensive portions had been deleted"[12].

Conclusion

There were multi-causes why Napoleon treated Lamarck with scorn and disrespect. The advance of the sciences was permitted providing it did not conflict with the Emperor's negotiation with the Church. The treaty with the Church encouraged the religious traditionalists to assert their dominance over those who were labelled "revolutionaries" or "atheists". Lamarck was identified with the firebrands of the Revolution and his enormous production of interdisciplinary studies, which indeed should have brought early recognition and later honor as a Renaissance man, was not forthcoming. The totalitarian state did not encourage biological and social theories which championed transformation. Those who hold monolithic power dread gradual changes which can metamorphize into democratic principles. Napoleon possessing a low threshold of tolerance for those he feared or despised could not evolve or mellow into a more understanding leader or elder statesman.

Perhaps, Napoleon's practical need for Cuvier's administrative ability may have been the major impetus for treating a world renowed scholar so shabbily. Cuvier acted as a scoundrel from the very beginning of his association with Lamarck. Cuvier's verbal attack on Lamarck during his lectures as well as the suggestion that he or his followers has deliberately mistranslated Lamarck's use of the term "avoir besoin de" from the meaning of need to desire precipitated Lamarck's downfall. For example, insects desiring their specific forms and ducks willing their webbed feet. The application of this term tended to impair Lamarck's image to the rest of the academic world. Above all, Lamarck's statue as an anti-vitalist may

have convinced Napoleon that he had no diplomatic need for the support of this fringe of science and therefore displayed his true nature by curtly dismissing Lamarck. Napoleon's behavior placed a blemish on Lamarck's scientific reputation which was previously accepted for its venerable sagacity.

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