

NEWSletter

Vol. 38, No. 4, October 2009

of the History of Science Society

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Notes from the Inside

Activity in the HSS Executive Office continues to quicken as our highly anticipated annual meeting in Phoenix approaches. Since this year's conference will feature numerous changes, I want to provide you with an update on a few of these changes. We are meeting later than usual, the weekend before the U.S. Thanksgiving, and part of the reason for doing so is that hotel rates are significantly cheaper this time of year. Since Phoenix is a vacation destination, we also thought that members might want to linger in the area and sample the natural beauty of the Southwest. But perhaps the biggest change in the conference is its format. We are building on last year's successful prize ceremony where we detached the prize ceremony from the banquet so that more members could attend the ceremony. We received many positive comments regarding the ceremony, but we learned that our Saturday night was now too full: prize ceremony, distinguished lecture, reception, and Society dinner. Therefore, we have moved the prize ceremony to Friday night, to be followed by the distinguished lecture, which will be given by M. Norton Wise. After the lecture we will host an open reception honoring the prizewinners, allowing us to set aside all of Saturday evening for an experiment. This is the experiment. After the sessions end on Saturday, everyone is invited to make their way to the beautiful Heard Museum for the Society dinner where we will celebrate the prizewinners and the history of science (there is a space on the registration form to indicate if you plan to attend). We expect some 300 attendees at the dinner, and we wish to create an atmosphere that will allow delegates to circulate freely, converse, enjoy good food, and admire the splendid holdings at the Heard (guided tours will be provided). It is our hope that this event will facilitate discussion and friendship. The end result will be a stronger Society, one well positioned to foster interest in the history of science. Since this new format for the conference is experimental, I will be grateful if you would provide me feedback on what worked, what did not work, and what we could do to make the meeting even better.

And as always, thank you for your membership in the HSS.
Jay

Some Thoughts on Historians and Contemporary Anti-evolutionism

By John M. Lynch

In a recent book review for *The British Journal for the History of Science*, Thomas Dixon asks what contribution historians of science can make to the debate about intelligent design (ID).¹ As myself and others noted in a 2008 *Isis* Focus article, historians have many opportunities to make contributions to this most public of debates, yet our community has largely resisted the Siren's call of engagement with creationism.² In this brief note, I would like to offer some thoughts on current creationist tactics with regards to the history of science and hopefully inspire some readers to engage in this significant debate.

The modern ID movement arose in the last two decades of the last century, although to a significant degree its roots were planted in the Young Earth Creationist movement which re-emerged in America in the 1960s. The Discovery Institute (DI, the leading proponent and funder of ID) disputes this historical fact even in the face of manifest evidence presented in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* trial. While purportedly beginning with the secular purpose of convincing scientists that their adherence to naturalistic explanation was misplaced, the ID movement's religious motivations became obvious both in private and public writings.³ Having failed to convince the scientific community – and having been dealt a significant blow by the ruling in *Kitzmiller* – the movement has recently stepped up its incursions into historical analysis with a series of works that collectively see modern biology, in the guise of an historically uncontextualized “Darwinism,” as both the product

of Epicurean (i.e. pagan, anti-Christian) materialism and a cause of many modern ills.⁴ Even the briefest examination of some

of these works clearly indicates the furrow that the ID movement is attempting to plough.

Political scientist John West outlines these claims in his book, *Darwin Day in America: How Our Politics and Culture Have Been Dehumanized in the Name of Science*. According to West, who echoes a claim previously made by Benjamin Wiker, the pagan materialism of the Greek philosopher Epicurus and the Roman poet Lucretius gave rise to modern scientific naturalism. As West sees it, this influence in turn has led to the rule of a scientific elite over democracy, utopian idealism, moral relativism, censorship of dissent, and dehumanization.

This theme of dehumanization has become something of an *idée fixe* for modern anti-evolutionists. Darwin is seen as, if not a causative factor of, then an inspiration for, the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Darwin's work, we are told, led to the devaluation of human life, eugenics, the Holocaust, Planned Parenthood, and fetal stem cell research. Nowhere is this theme more evident than in the pro-ID movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, in which Ben Stein unsubtly portrays Darwin's writ-



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1 T. Dixon, *British Journal for the History of Science* (2009) 42:440.

2 G. Gooday et al. *Isis* (2008) 99:322-330.

3 See, for example, the notorious “Wedge” document (<http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.html>) for the former and the evolution of the writings of Philip E. Johnson or William Dembski for the latter.

4 For example, B. Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (InterVarsity, 2002) & *The Darwin Myth: The Life and Lies of Charles Darwin* (Regnery, 2009); R. Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); J. West, *Darwin Day in America* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2007). All the authors are connected formally with the DI.

ings as leading to the Holocaust and “Darwinists” as waging a campaign of terror against ID proponents. Egregiously, Stein selectively quotes Darwin to make it appear as if he disapproved of measures to aid the sick and infirm. Even more egregiously, in publicity interviews Stein has baldly stated that “science leads you to kill people” and “Darwinism led – in a pretty much straight line – to Nazism and the Holocaust.”⁵ While it would be comforting to imagine that Stein’s position was that of a politically motivated crank, it has received support from historian and DI fellow Richard Weikart, who appears onscreen with Stein during an interview conducted at Dachau. Weikart’s published attempts to link Darwin to Hitler have received negative commentary from such historians as Robert Richards, Paul Farber, Sander Gilboff, and Nils Roll-Hansen, yet these ideas have continued to be promulgated by Benjamin Wiker (again, a DI fellow) in his *The Darwin Myth: The Life and Lies of Charles Darwin*, a biography that Gilboff accurately, if caustically, compares with the writings of the journalist Rita Skeeter from the Harry Potter series.⁶

Given the rigorous peer review process required for publication in leading academic journals and presses, it is unsurprising that ID proponents make little attempt to engage with the community of professional historians. Their claims are made in books published largely by conservative (e.g. Regnery, Intercollegiate Studies Institute), religious (e.g. InterVarsity, an outgrowth of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship campus ministry) or vanity (e.g. Erasmus Press, owned by William Dembski) presses. Unsurprisingly papers are neither presented at conferences nor published in relevant journals and little attempt is made to undergo review by practicing historians with expertise in Darwin, his ideas, and their socio-cultural effects. In short, anti-evolutionist historical scholarship accurately mirrors creationist scientific

work in being directed at the true believers rather than the academic community. The temptation may thus be for professional historians to ignore their claims – a temptation that I feel must be rejected. As historians, we have a social duty to correct error and over-simplification where it is foisted on the public by politically and religiously motivated individuals, and this responsibility goes beyond what sociologist and ID sympathizer Steve Fuller has dismissively seen as “catching the errors” of the creationists.⁷ There is something far more fundamental at stake. At a time where historians have eschewed Whig or “Great Man” histories, anti-evolutionists are presenting their “Not-So-Great Man” view of Darwin. They misrepresent the very nature of historical enquiry; they manipulate history until it risks becoming a mere shadow of the rich and intricate tapestry that it is.

Our collective research as historians can obviously help disprove claims made by anti-evolutionists regarding both the social effects of scientific ideas and how the scientific community functions. Many of us study scientific change, community formation over time, and the treatment of heretical ideas and controversy. In so doing, we have developed a realistic view of science and its social effects – both positive and negative – along with a clear conceptualization of how evolutionary biology has matured as a field over the past two hundred years. Our research directly opposes the erroneous and simplistic views of the anti-evolutionists, yet it remains largely unknown to the public. While I am not calling for historians to engage in popularization of their work, although that too may have benefits, I do believe that increased public engagement for those of us who have something relevant to say debunking the claims of anti-evolutionists is nothing less than a shared social responsibility. Such engagement is, thankfully, beginning.⁸

Such public engagement is not, however, with-

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⁵ For more of Stein’s utterances, and a complete debunking of the claims made in the movie, see <http://expelledexposed.com>

⁶ S. Gilboff, *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* (in press) <http://ncseweb.org/rncse/29/review-darwin-myth>

⁷ S. Fuller, *Isis* (2009) 100: 115.

⁸ For example, Mark Borrello has publically engaged with John West on the claim that there is a link between Darwin and dehumanization. See <http://www.mnscience.org/index.php?id=138>

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out its perils. As detailed in the last issue of this newsletter, Peter Bowler, Sandra Herbert and Janet Browne were not given full disclosure by Fathom Media (an offshoot of the creationist organization Creation Ministries International) when interviewed for the documentary *The Voyage That Shook The World*.⁹ Unaware of the underlying anti-evolutionary agenda of the work, the historians gave interviews that were apparently selectively edited to highlight certain aspects of Darwin's life. Equally as problematic was the equation of the contributions of historians with those of unqualified non-experts on matters of history. As Bowler *et al.* note, "if academic historians refuse to participate when movements they don't approve of seek historical information, these historians can hardly complain if less reputable sources are used instead." When we speak out, we risk being caught between the Scylla of non-engagement and the Charybdis of having our statements misused.

Still, if the past few years are any indicator, it is highly likely that the future will see further creationist manipulation of history within the public sphere, and the only way to combat that trend is active engagement. Public engagement with those communities who seek to misuse history will be frustrating and not without dangers. Yet it also offers us an opportunity to enlighten the public about the nature of historical enquiry and the fertile area that the history of science represents.¹⁰

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⁹ P. Bowler *et al.* *History of Science Society Newsletter* (2009) http://hssonline.org/publications/Newsletter2009/July_Perils_Publicity.html

¹⁰ Previous discussion regarding historians' engagement on this issue resulted in a number of letters to *Isis*. I would like to encourage an ongoing dialog at <http://blog.jmlynch.org> (search for "HSS newsletter").