


BOOK REVIEW

Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution for the People: Shaping Popular Ideas from Darwin to the Present*

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In *Evolution for the People*, Peter Bowler sets out to describe a history of evolutionism from the standpoint of what the public knew. How were ideas about evolutionism presented or disseminated to mass audiences and the elusive ‘ordinary reader’? How did ideas travel beyond the echelons of the scientific elite, and how did other contemporary ideas, developments or discoveries influence how evolutionism was read and received? Beginning with Erasmus Darwin rather than Charles Darwin, Bowler traces a roughly chronological survey of evolutionary ideas from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twenty-first, following a methodological and historiographical introductory chapter. Alongside Erasmus Darwin’s erotic-evolutionary poetry, the second chapter covers Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Comte de Buffon, William Paley and Robert Chambers, lingering justifiably on the latter’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. Chapters 3 to 8 take the narrative through to the end of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth, exploring contemporary reactions to Charles Darwin during his life, as well as the emergence of alternative evolutionary theories – and epic narratives – after his death. Gorillas are popularized, religions are unsettled, fossils are discovered, species and peoples are classified and trees of life in endless forms are drawn (many of them most beautifully, including the one that graces the cover of the book). Importantly, Bowler notes the growth and decreasing cost of print media across the nineteenth century and the emergence of cinema, radio and eventually television in the twentieth, all of which contributed to the increasing awareness of evolutionism in ordinary life – both the Darwinian variety and other alternatives like orthogenesis or neo-Lamarckism. Chapters 9 and 10 trace the history of public-oriented evolution through the Modern Synthesis and into the twenty-first century, with special consideration given to palaeoanthropology, sociobiology and the rise of modern creationism.

Even though *Evolution for the People* takes a narrower line through the history of evolution and Darwinism than Bowler’s previous work, there remains a great deal of intellectual, social and political ground to cover. The dual focus on Darwinian evolution and its transmission means that treatment of some major topics, like the development of genetics, is necessarily brief. As a teaching text, *Evolution for the People* would be appropriate for an undergraduate seminar or lecture course on the history of evolutionary theory, slotting in between Bowler and Iwan Rhys Morus’s excellent and accessible *Making Modern Science* (2020) and Bowler’s equally excellent *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (2009) – more specialized and expansive than the coverage of evolution in the first, more generalized and

public-oriented than in the second. Covering this much material in detail is a formidable challenge and Bowler is at his best in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the later part of the twentieth century feels comparatively underdone.

For new entrants to the field, the many quick synopses of major figures, debates and publications will provide useful grounding information, but more familiar scholarly readers may wish Bowler had exchanged breadth for greater depth and historiographic engagement. *Evolution for the People* touches relatively lightly on the interplay between evolutionism and empire, primarily through some brief consideration of race and anthropology. There is no discussion of sex and gender, even though ideas about sex and evolution played significant roles in late nineteenth-century debates over the role of women in politics and public life. The geographic focus is almost entirely on the United States and the United Kingdom, with some brief departures for France and Germany, even though we now know that many evolutionary texts circulated widely and have complex (and extremely interesting) translation histories. In some settings, Darwinism and evolutionism were synonymous, but in others, translations of Darwin followed and were informed by earlier translations of Herbert Spencer or were heavily influenced by the translator's knowledge of Lamarck. In other words, different peoples ended up with different versions of evolution, and put those versions of evolution towards varied national, political and religious ends. Perhaps more critically for a synthetic and synoptic work, these omissions also reflect some of the most dynamic areas in current Darwinism scholarship, which leaves the text at times out of step with where the field is now.

Most challengingly, despite its stated goal to bridge the gap between a history of theoretical scientific developments discussed by expert elites and the popular understanding of science by a wide variety of readers, museum-goers, schoolchildren and enthusiastic amateurs (and presumably now TikTok and YouTube watchers), *Evolution for the People* remains focused much more on production than on reception. It is a supply-side history of evolutionary thinking, where we learn about Spencer's publications, but not his readers, or about the content of Jacob Bronowski's *Ascent of Man* (1973), but not its viewership or cultural impact. Why did audiences respond so strongly to Richard Dawkins and E.O. Wilson, and how did that response compare to the response to the major works of the Modern Synthesis a few decades earlier? Certainly, in some areas of evolutionary theory, popular writing – especially in its more speculative forms – was a major area of scientific production and had a significant impact on the public imaginary, and Bowler makes an excellent case for its importance in the history of human evolution, extending and expanding on material from his *Theories of Human Evolution: A Century of Debate* (1986). Generally, however, the book would have been stronger for more extensive analysis of key sources, whether in the form of a close reading of evolutionary themes in H. Rider Haggard novels, for instance, or more detailed discussion of popular-science works like William K. Gregory's wonderfully titled *Our Face from Fish to Man* (1929). Instead, Bowler frequently falls back into the intellectual arc of evolutionary theory – explaining to the people (the history of) evolution like one of his historical actors. Ultimately, Bowler's narrative is one of scientists and science popularizers talking to the public, but it leaves the reader wondering who the people of the title were, how much those people heard what evolutionists were saying, and how they might have talked back.