Book review:
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Darwin for Everyman: How scientific debates about evolution went public

EVOLUTION FOR THE PEOPLE: SHAPING POPULAR IDEAS FROM DARWIN TO THE PRESENT. Peter J. Bowler. 294pp. Cambridge University Press. £26.

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Charles Darwin had little to do with the spread of the term "evolution". It had long evoked a purposeful unrolling that was the opposite of his vision of contingent open-endedness. Aside from a single "evolved", the term is absent from the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), as it is from the titles of all his subsequent books. Yet even he used it from time to time: a concession to the growing popularity of the evolutionary writings of others, notably the journalist turned philosopher Herbert Spencer.

Evolution for the People by Peter J. Bowler is a history of evolutionism that, in step with recent scholarly trends, aims to take seriously how the specialist debates resonated in the wider culture and – as with "evolution" itself – vice versa. The new orientation makes for some striking differences in emphasis. In Bowler's classic survey *Evolution: The history of an idea* (1983), for example, he devoted far more space to the eighteenth-century naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon than to another materialist thinker of the era, Baron d'Holbach. Now he gives them nearly equal coverage, because, for all the interest of Buffon's proposals on how humans and other species originated and changed by natural processes, the relevant passages in his *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* rarely circulated beyond the libraries of the wealthy. Although much sketchier, the ideas along those lines in d'Holbach's paean to the moral and political virtues of atheism, *Système de le nature* (1770), benefited from a cheap English translation published in 1820 and went on to inspire atheist radicals in Britain.

In the main, Bowler's excursions into the books, newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias, museums, lecture halls and radio and television broadcasts where most people in Britain and America actually met the theory of evolution serve to update the familiar story, not to upend it. The basic plot structure of mid-Victorian emergence, early-twentieth-century eclipse and mid-twentieth-century revival for Darwinism remains central. As before, Bowler fully integrates the histories of social Darwinism, eugenics and race-hierarchy anthropology with the history of creationism and its successors. On the latter, his account is winningly personal; we learn that, as a staff member at Queen's University Belfast from 1979, he "was sometimes called in to confront visiting creationists on local radio". He reprints a flyer from a Creation Discovery Day held in a Belfast church in 1996.

The most fascinating update, however, concerns evolutionary contingency – the idea that evolutionary outcomes could have been otherwise, that changes to history would result in different evolutionary outcomes than are seen today. According to Bowler, several developments converged to keep it largely invisible in the nineteenth-century discussion. One was a coincidence: the publicizing of the French-American hunter and adventurer Paul du Chaillu's gorilla specimens and tales shortly after *Origin* came out, misleadingly dramatizing ape-to-human linearity. Another was the tendency to interpret newly unearthed fossils as belonging to species so much like existing ones – dinosaurs as en route to becoming today's lizards, Neanderthals as en route to becoming us – that the direction of evolution seemed inevitable. A third was the continuing vitality of the religion-friendly progressionism encountered in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (a controversial bestseller by Robert Chambers that predated *Origin* by 15 years and outsold it until the 1890s), Spencer's work and what the historian of science Bernard Lightman has called "evolutionary epics," depicting evolution as a triumphant struggle upwards, as in Arabella Buckley's book for young readers *Winners in Life's Race* (1882).

Yet by 1914, as Bowler shows, the mood had changed. The shift was prompted in part by the realization that dinosaurs, Neanderthals and many other vanished species were in fact dead ends, inhabiting branches on the tree of life that went nowhere, and in part by excitement over the French philosopher Henri Bergson's insistence on life's creative freedom in evolving responses to environmental challenges. Bowler quotes a popular science encyclopedia on how, had the dinosaurs been less sluggish, the mammals might have gone extinct and a non-human species would now reign supreme. Similar messages soon featured in museum displays, science-fiction novels and elsewhere. Amid the popular science of the First World War and its aftermath, Bowler thus finds that the "foundations were being laid for a new version of Darwinism with evolution represented as a process of unpredictable branching in which there were no predetermined goals, progressive or otherwise".

Gregory Radick is Professor of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Leeds. His most recent book is *Disputed Inheritance: The Battle over Mendel and the Future of Biology*, 2023.