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Review: The Darwin Adventure Continues

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ESSAY REVIEW

The Darwin Adventure Continues

*By Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis**

John C. Greene. *Debating Darwin: Adventures of a Scholar.* iv + 288 pp., index. Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 1999. \$34.95 (cloth).

This marvelous book comprises an unusual set of writings by John C. Greene, one of our leading historians of evolutionary thought. The writings include personal reflections, published essays, revised scholarly articles, and important correspondence with two of the great figures of evolutionary theory and its history and philosophy, Theodosius Dobzhansky and Ernst Mayr. The unifying link in this assortment of writings is the ongoing conversation about Darwinian evolution, especially pertaining to the interaction of science, ideology, and worldview; hence the title of the book, *Debating Darwin*, refers not so much to a debate with Darwin as to the ongoing debate among scholars of Darwin and Darwinism—historians, philosophers, and scientists—about how best to understand Darwinism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One fact that the collection establishes is that many of the debates about Darwinism stem from the varied backgrounds of the commentators. This fact alone is not surprising, of course, but what is very surprising is the extent to which major disputes about our understanding of the history of evolution seem to be inevitable outcomes of the backgrounds of the protagonists. As Greene makes clear in the first essay of the volume, a personalized intellectual history titled “I Discover Darwin and Darwinians,” he has a vastly different background from those historians or philosophers who came to Darwinism from evolutionary theory. Influenced by mentors like the American intellectual historian Bert James Loewenberg (whose life interests included the exploration of Darwinism in America), and with a “longstanding interest in the relations between science and religion” (p. 14), Greene came to Darwinism after an initial interest in American and then European intellectual history. It was not until his forty-first year that he “met Charles Darwin.” This is in stark contrast to individuals like Theodosius Dobzhansky, Julian Huxley, and Ernst Mayr, who came to the history of ideas and intellectual history from a scientific background. For Greene, the fact that scientific ideas are shaped within a culture that includes sociopolitical and religious concerns is a given; the dominant theme that has undergirded his scholarship is demonstrating the interaction of science, worldview, and ideology with

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examples from evolutionary thought. But for scientists like Dobzhansky, Huxley, and Mayr, who sought to flesh out the historical details of Darwinian evolution at the same time that they were building what Greene identifies as the neo-Darwinian synthetic theory, the primary goal was to demonstrate that “Darwin was a pure scientist uncontaminated by what came to be known as ‘social Darwinism’ and completely emancipated from both natural and revealed theology—an atheist or at best an agnostic” (p. 13). For the “architects” of the synthesis, Darwin was thus a figure removed or at least distant from the very ideological, philosophical, and cultural backdrop that Greene found so attractive. The very thing that turned Greene on to Darwin was what the architects were seeking to turn off both in Darwin and in themselves, as they tried to establish their own vision of the synthetic theory.

To Greene, furthermore, the fact that the architects like Huxley seemed to be establishing a “new secular religion of evolutionary progress in neo-Darwinian biology” not only percolated into their historical interpretation of Darwin and Darwinism but also resulted in the teleological, anthropocentric figures of speech that they used. The architects, according to Greene, excused these lapses as “convenient shorthand for purely scientific ways of stating facts and theories,” but the serious historian of ideas “could not take so benign and unproblematic a view of the similes and metaphors used by twentieth-century biologists.” To Greene, “they reflected underlying tensions in biological thought, tensions which could be traced back to the writings of Darwin himself and beyond” (p. 14).

Given these deep differences, it is not surprising that a major dispute erupted in 1987 with the appearance of an issue of *Revue de Synthèse* that featured an essay by Greene titled “History of Ideas Revisited,” revised for this collection. This article summarized Greene’s view of the complex interplay of science, ideology, and worldview from Darwin to the neo-Darwinians. It drew a blistering response from Ernst Mayr, who followed with his own essay, “The Death of Darwin?” (also reproduced in this collection), that spared Greene no criticism. Mayr insisted that Greene had always wanted to prove the “death of Darwin” and had ignored the labors of biologists who devoted the last fifty years to “make Darwin’s thoughts better known” (p. 139). “Greene, the historian, is very much of an externalist, and seems inclined to ascribe all changes in scientific theory to ideological forces” (p. 141). Mayr closed with an equally revelatory remark: “The claims of certain outsiders that Darwinism is in the process of being refuted are entirely based on ignorance” (p. 146).

The dispute between Greene and Mayr did not stop there: it resumed with a letter to the editor of the *Journal of the History of Biology*, Everett Mendelsohn, that saw Greene responding to the republication of Mayr’s critical commentary in *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology*.¹ Greene’s letter asserts that Mayr had “misunderstood and misrepresented his views about Darwin” (p. 146). Further correspondence between Greene and Mayr over this and other matters, in the way of an epistolary dialogue, includes substantive discussion of their differences and similarities. What emerges is important: their differences come not from their views of science but from their views of history. Similarly, the earlier correspondence between Greene and Dobzhansky sheds much light on Dobzhansky’s religious and philosophical beliefs and on the tension between evolution and religion.

Debating Darwin includes many other selected writings, all valuable to the historian of evolution—if only for the fact that it makes available in one volume a selection of Greene’s

¹ Ernst Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap, 1988).

work for a younger generation of scholars. My own sense is that younger historians will gain a new appreciation for Greene. Long before words like “discourse,” “context,” and “culture” entered the parlance of historians of science, Greene was happily exploring science in those terms. I, for instance, am simply delighted to see that he situates evolutionists within positivist philosophical currents, something that philosophers of biology have found distasteful indeed. This volume is a significant contribution to the body of literature on the history of evolution; I would argue that it is essential reading for graduate students entering the field and for all historians of evolution who are seriously interested in its historiography.