Punch's Apes and Darwin's Bulldog: Making Natural Knowledge at the Dawn of Darwinism

Abstract

Even in its first decade, Darwinism sparked heated debate. Humankind’s origin, our place in the universe, the existence of progress — these are just a few issues that fueled early disputes. Confronted with so tangled a set of Darwinian discourses, historians have tended to approach the reception of Darwinism one social group, one issue, or one medium at a time. This approach has yielded valuable scholarship. Yet by considering each strand of the early Darwinian debates in near-isolation, the historical literature leaves the impression that producers of science and non-scientists inhabited entirely different worlds.

My paper seeks to bridge this historiographical gap using a framework I label “natural knowledge,” a term borrowed from Darwinian scientist Thomas Henry Huxley. My study considers not science per se, but science as one of many ways people understand the world around them and their place in it. It reunites the scientists who popularized Darwinism with the public that discussed it, revealing just how widely contested natural knowledge was. More specifically, at least three forms of natural knowledge emerged around Darwinism during the 1860s. In popularizing Darwinism, Huxley insisted that only trained experts, disinterested in religion, could produce legitimate natural knowledge. Yet in his own advocacy for Darwinism, scientist Asa Gray implied that only religion could justify pursuing natural knowledge. All the while, readers and contributors of Punch, Britain’s preeminent satirical weekly, created their own form of natural knowledge. They refused to divorce science from its social context, instead embedding Darwinism in discussions of race, class, gender, and empire. They used irony to heighten the contradictions embedded in these contexts. Collectively, this community birthed a new species of natural knowledge — a species whose substance and significance sprung from the contradictory mishmash of contexts in which Victorians themselves first encountered Darwinism.