

Five years of Darwin Seminars: A paradigm shift?

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In 2030 when retirement looms, perhaps my students will ask what it was like in the golden age, way back in the 20th century, when evolutionary psychology was born, and when the human sciences finally realized they must turn Darwinian. The faces and images that spring to mind will come largely, I suspect, from the Darwin Seminars. Long after the unmarked days of research and writing slip away, and the ordinary conferences jumble together in their vacuous grey drone, these seminars will stand out as the events that mattered.

It is a rare privilege for a young scientist to live through a paradigm shift. Rarer still must be scientific revolutions marked by public events that combine manifest historical significance with the simple joy of good company. Vienna in the 1920s had its quantum theory and logical positivism, but no salon where they could be appreciated as they unfolded. Plate tectonics revolutionized geology in the pages of learned journals, not in electric meetings full of luminaries drinking some rather good wine. Even the debate between T.H. Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce at the Linnaean Society in 1860 was an ill-tempered, anti-climactic, rather confused affair, unworthy of the Darwinian revolution that it marked. What Helena Cronin has achieved with the Darwin Seminars is to make a scientific revolution pleasurable for the revolutionaries, their onlookers, and often even their opponents.

It is not quite fair to say that evolutionary psychology was born in 1990s London. The crucial event was a shared sabbatical year in 1989 when the young visionaries -- Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, Martin Daly, Margo Wilson, David Buss, and Gerd Gigerenzer -- gathered at Stanford University in California. As a graduate student there, I witnessed many conversations among them along the lines of 'What if this actually worked? What if people took evolution seriously in thinking about human behavior? Could it happen in twenty years? Or thirty?' To imagine something like the Darwin Seminars actually succeeding, and succeeding within a decade, seemed impossibly optimistic. Each of those visionaries has since founded their own center for Darwinizing the human sciences: Cosmides and Tooby in California, Daly and Wilson in Canada, Buss in Texas, Gigerenzer in Berlin.

But against all odds, the Darwin Seminars have established England as the intellectual clearing-house, the place where the scientific agenda gets set and the social impact gets assessed. This is due partly to Britain's sophisticated secularism in contrast to America's creationism and political correctness, and partly to the strength of popular science journalism here. Yet it is mostly due to the energy, organization, social skills, and sound scientific judgment of one woman, Dr. Cronin.

The Darwin Seminars have had a personal significance that underscores their intellectual significance with no small degree of irony. I gave one of the first seminars almost five years ago, about how the human mind may have evolved largely for courtship display. The audience numbered no more than twenty, but among them was a science journalist who, despite initial skepticism, became sufficiently interested to interview me afterwards. We eventually fell in love, had a child, bought a house together. My theoretical display seems to have worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our daughter Atalanta, now a chatty toddler, is one happy outcome of the

Darwin Seminars. When scientists meet the media, greater public understanding of science is not the only salutary result.

The Darwin seminars have fulfilled their initial mission, bringing the first wave of evolutionary psychology to public attention. Everyone now has heard about waist-to-hip ratios, homicidal step-fathers, mutational meltdowns, and reciprocal altruism. Critics often complain that evolutionary psychology has a lot of public hype and only a few solid results so far. Fine. Give us the resources and we will do the research. There are probably more British television producers making films about evolutionary psychology than there are British evolutionary psychologists doing the research.

A scientific revolution needs meetings to come to life, but it needs proper research centers, grants, and professorships to thrive. The Darwin Seminars re-awakened the public's legitimate expectation that science should help us understand human nature, not just human culture. Those who have prospered from the public, whether through profits or taxes, owe it to them to support the science they want. If not Britain, where? If not now, when?