

# **The First Darwin Anniversary: 1909**

## **Vying views on the origins of life in Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century**

### **Theses of the doctoral dissertation (PhD)**

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## **I. Antecedents of the work (introduction, setting of goals)**

History of science often turns its attention to events of commemoration in science like jubilees of the birth and death of scientists, or their discoveries. Charles Darwin lends himself especially easily to such approach as his birth jubilees coincide with those of the publication of his main work, *Origins of Species*, published at his age of fifty.

The goal of this dissertation is a comprehensive reconstruction of the Darwin-jubilee of 1909 in Hungary, by which a contribution can be made to the history of Darwin's reception in Hungary. The literature concerning the reception of evolution theory in Hungary is rather patchy, although the last few years saw some increase in the intensity of research. Having reviewed the most relevant twenty-three historiographical studies it seems that the scholars focused most on the first twenty years, starting in 1860, and the end of the 19th century – the beginning of the 20th has been studied less. The works published during the years of socialism bear the signs of significant ideological bias: the publications only rarely touch on the politico-social-religious environment and there is no agreement on periodization. The entire literature reviewed containing but a single reference comprising of a few sentences to the 1909 jubilee.

The present dissertation depicts the entire year of 1909 as a single „event”, consisting of the commemorations held, articles and studies published, and all other 1909 publications that have the subject of Darwinism in the focus (even though they may not refer to the jubilee). Separate chapters deal in the dissertation with the ways the jubilee was celebrated and the appreciation of the scientist. By the period studied evolutionism had become the generally accepted approach in biology, however Darwin's ideas about the emergence of species was still under fire by scientific, philosophical and theological circles both in Hungary and elsewhere. For this reason, separate chapters review the contemporary approaches to *evolutionism*, the narrow sense *Darwinism*, and scientific *alternatives* to the latter. Darwinian views on the origins being a rival to the traditional teachings on creation, the emerging interpretations of creation by various denominations and their relationship to Darwin's theory and its contemporary variations deserve to be dealt with as a separate subject. The last chapters put the basic science historical approach into a different light of social history. Here the main question was: How do the Darwinian ideas, or, in a broader context, the evolutionary ideas, appear in science, philosophy, education and sociological and political thought in the context of Hungary's society at the time of the early 20th century. The research also covered who were the main protagonists who influenced the social discourse on Darwinism most.

## **II. Applied methods**

The fourth chapter summarising the antecedents of the jubilee is based on the Hungarian literature on the subject and attempts to connect the products of research of shorter periods into a span of fifty years. This chapter is, thus, based on the contemporary sources and statements covered in literature and only includes contemporary sources occasionally.

The chief methodological question of the research was what kind of approach and technique would give the most plastic account of the 1909 Event. Using digital and traditional searches, dozens of keywords were searched and, as a result, a great number of contemporary sources were identified in a variety of publications. Some of these books, articles and essays were inspired by the jubilee; most of them did not refer to the jubilee, still, they were touching on the subject of Darwinism and/or evolutionism from a natural historical, sociological or theological point of view. A lesser number of sources from years preceding and following 1909 were also identified, which form a kind of frame to the materials of the targeted year.

The sources were processed along the lines of defined subjects. This gave rise to a structure of the chapters, which used relevant parts of the sources as building materials, occasionally collating them with the (acceptable or amendable) statements in the appropriate literature.

One may object whether a research effort focusing on a single year will not miss the wider, longer term historical or intellectual historical tendencies. From this point of view, choosing a jubilee year was appropriate as many contemporary authors gave a retrospective of the preceding fifty years thus helped to avoid a dry and isolated presentation of the year 1909. In this way, the different subjects could be presented in their historical context. From the point of view of the researcher, the chosen methods turned out to be useful in a deeper understanding of an important, although so far neglected, episode of the history of the reception of the ideas concerned.

## **III. Theses: Summary of own achievements in points**

*Thesis 1: The fifty years preceding the Darwin-jubilee.* Reception of Darwin's ideas up to the jubilee has three periods. *Period 1 (1860–1867):* the first accounts, personal debates with ideological charge. First attempts to reconcile the principle of creation with evolution. *Period 2 (1867–1875):* Darwinism becomes widespread, which is borne out by the articles in biology papers and general press as well as events in the higher education. A variety of reactions by churches, relatively more openness by protestants. *Period 3 (after 1875):* further spread of the

theory of origins and it affects views on the society as well, however, support for the teachings on selection decreases among biologists. A proliferation of alternative evolutionary views. Year 1909 is within this period and does not constitute a limit.

*Thesis 2: Ways of celebrating the centenary.* Commemoration of the jubilee took the forms of articles and functions. Among writings pertaining to biology, commemorative essays were included as preface of a Darwin translation published in 1909, in the *Natural History Letters*, in the *Zoological Letters*, in the popular science magazines *Animal Kingdom* and *Urania*, and in a leaflet containing the lecture of a physician. Darwin reminiscences were published also outside the scientific publications such as religious, pedagogical, horticultural and rural lifestyle publications; an atheist author printed his own celebratory speech in leaflet form. On the occasion of the centenary, the social sciences magazine *Huszadik Század* („Twentieth Century”) also gave an account of Darwin’s reception by social sciences. A large number of periodicals and daily newspapers advertised or reported centenary events; celebrations abroad were covered less frequently.

Larger scale Darwin commemorations were not initiated by the government. Several cities saw commemorative functions organised as civil initiatives by scientists, scholars, university fraternities and freethinkers. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences did not hold a commemoration (even though Darwin had been an external member since 1872). The person and the theory of the English scientist were attractive mainly to zoologists, on the social level, to the Social Democrats, civil radicals, and freethinkers (thus, forces outside the Parliament), much less to the conservative-liberal or conservative parties and to the clergy.

*Thesis 3: About the assessment of Darwin as a person.* Darwin’s name was mentioned with respect even by those who, because of their scientific or ideological views, did not agree with him. His emergence was considered a momentous event because he introduced a historical, evolutionary element into the world view on nature and interpreted the emergence of species without relying on the supernatural. Occasionally the appreciations have a quasi religious, idealising, cult-like ring: some regarded the English scientist as the personification of science or of general progress.

*Thesis 4: Popularity of the basic principle of evolution in biology.* The theory of evolution was almost completely accepted in science, but some theist authors questioned even the pillars of evolution referring to scientific arguments – especially as regards the origins of man which was the most controversial point in evolutionist theory. As far as volume and

informativeness is concerned, the book by theologian János Dudek arguing with the evolutionary views of biologist Sándor Gorka was the most outstanding work of the polemy among Hungarian authors in 1909.

*Thesis 5: Uncertainties about the Darwinian theory of selection.* While the thought of natural evolution took root in the scientific and popular thinking during the period 1859 to 1909, the mechanism of *natural selection* by which Darwin tried to explain transitions from one species to another, was subject to strong doubt at the time of the jubilee, in Hungary as well as internationally. The doubt was so strong that some authors heralded the burial of Darwinism on the 100th anniversary of Darwin's birth. However, the Darwinian concept of *struggle for existence* took root in natural philosophy and was often applied in social sciences as well. The expression *Darwinism* has assumed additional meanings during the years, being used in the context of cosmological, biological, social and cultural evolution or competition.

*Thesis 6: Alternatives of Darwinism.* Because of the popular distaste for the explanation based on natural selection, a number of alternative evolutionary theories were proposed in science, which can be categorised as vitalist or naturalist propositions. These theories differed on the following points: whether the evolution takes place because of transcendental or immanent psychic powers; whether progress is gradual or in leaps and bounds; what are the proportions of the factors emphasized by Darwin vs. Lamarck; whether the process is blind or teleological. The theories of German scientists of varying views had the most significant impact in Hungarian authors, who rarely embraced the theory of this or that foreign researcher, rather, their explanations were either indeterminate or of patchwork nature. On the Hungarian scene one can note the absence of well-defined scientific schools, while the understanding of individual researchers offered a great variety of combinations of explanations. Most of the Hungarian scientists preferred mechanistic (naturalistic) theories. Through their scholarly criticism, religious scientists tried to redirect scientific thinking toward the (reinterpreted) Biblical approach.

*Thesis 7: Reactions of denominations.* Authors of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faith strongly criticised the entirely materialistic explanation of the origin of species, however, rather than Darwin, they considered the monist German scholar, Ernst Haeckel as their chief opponent whom they frequently criticised. The theist authors emphasized that the thought of evolution could, within limits, be harmonised with the principle of divine creation. Several reinterpretations of the Biblical description of creation were offered, with Catholics strongest

insisting on the divine creation of the human species. The six days of creation is often interpreted as six aeons. However, none of the denominations seems to have issued an unambiguous, dogmatic statement on the timing and mode of creation, although a highly positioned Hungarian clergyman, Ottokar Prohaszka, earned a rebuke from the Vatican by taking the stance for the evolutionary origin of the human body.

**Thesis 8: The main protagonists of the centenary in Hungary.** The most vocal agents of the Darwin-year were some zoologists, theologians, social scientists and atheistic freethinkers, sometimes in combination: we encounter scientist-theologians and natural scientist-sociologists as well. With a single exception, no open combat took place between the confronting opinions; they were rather expressed as standalone statements or directed toward foreign opponents.

**Thesis 9: Place of evolutionary theories in science, philosophy and education at the early 20th century.** In science, evolution theory was coupled with positivism, monism and a mechanical approach to nature. In philosophy, atheism tried to claim exclusivity over Darwinism. A Hungarian philosopher, Menyhért Palágyi, proposed a creative, proprietary theory of origins. The evolutionary philosophy of Spencer matched Darwin's theory. The ethical connotations of evolutionary ideas also provoked debates. Educational materials included patches of evolutionist and religious references. There were initiatives to change the educational policy to have more science and less religion in the curricula.

**Thesis 10: Evolutionary ideas in a social context: politics, sociology.** Evolutionary ideas produced sundry offsprings with political philosophies. Liberalism appreciated the aspect of competition and development. Socialists, civil radicals and freethinkers found a confirmation of their materialistic ontology. Conservative ideology was sympathetic toward evolutionism only to a limited extent. They regarded it as an auxiliary theory, the „prevalence of the strongest” as justification of the rule over nationalities. A strong line in social Darwinism gave rise to the movement of eugenics which tried to improve the state of the society by breeding better humans. Militarism used the concept of *struggle for existence* to justify arms build-up. In social sciences, Darwinism lost some of its initial attraction, but it remained one of the factors moulding sociological thinking. All these tendencies can be observed in case of the 1909 historical snapshot as well.

*Thesis 11: The 1909 event as such, and as a reflection of historical processes.* The processing of over 130 sources from 1909 provided insight into how Darwinism and the evolutionary thinking was present in social as well as natural sciences and what impact it had on the various areas of intellectual life and on social institutions. When the documents are read with proper hindsight, however, they also bear out long-term tendencies in history and ideology acting during the preceding 50 years or more, of which the centennial sources are but stage reports. Such tendencies highlighted by the Darwin-anniversary are the increase of secularisation and atheism in European and Hungarian culture; the changes in the interpretation of creation, the popularity of the idea of social progress, and, within that, the proliferation of sociological and political ideas making use of the evolution theory. Thus, the Event, if analysed deeper, tells a lot more about history than just who said what about the questions of origin in that given year.

#### **IV. Publications on the topic by others and by the candidate**

Boros István (1959). A 100 esztendőös darwinizmus magyarországi pályafutása [Hundred Years of Darwinism in Hungary]. *Élővilág*, 4 (2), pp. 3–7, 20–25.

Ladányiné Boldog Erzsébet (1986): *A magyar filozófia és darwinizmus XIX. századi történetéből: 1850–1875* [On the History of 19th Century Hungarian Philosophy and Darwinism: 1850–1875]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Mund Katalin (2008): Reception of Darwin in the Nineteenth Century Hungarian Society. In E.-M. G. Engels, Thomas F. (eds.) (Ed.), *The Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe*. London–New York, Continuum, pp. 441–462.

Palló Gábor (2009): Darwin utazása Magyarországon [Darwin's Journey in Hungary]. *Magyar Tudomány*, 170 (6), pp. 714–726.

Rapaics Rajmund (1952). A darwinizmus magyar úttörői [Hungarian Pioneers of Darwinism]. *Természet és Technika* (4), pp. 196–204.

Rapaics Rajmund (1953). *A magyar biológia története* [History of Hungarian Biology]. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó.

Réti Endre (1962). Darwinisták és antidarwinisták Magyarországon [Darwinists and Anti-Darwinists in Hungary]. *Világosság*, 3 (7–8), pp. 61–65.

Soós Lajos (1932). A darwinizmus Darwin halála után 50 évvel [Darwinism: 50 Years After Darwin's Death]. *Természet világa: természettudományi közlöny*, 64, pp. 257–263.

Soós Sándor (2008): The Scientific Reception of Charles Darwin's Work In Nineteenth-century Hungary. In: E.-M. E. é. T. F. Glick (Ed.), *The Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe*. London–New-York, Continuum, pp. 430–440.

Stráner Katalin (2013): *Science, Translation and the Public: The Hungarian Reception of Darwinism, 1858–1875*. Doctoral thesis.

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Tasi István (2008): Tudomány a bíróságon [Science in the Courts]. In: *Magyar Tudomány* [Hungarian Science], 169 (12), pp. 1435–1446.

Tasi István (2009): A darwinizmus magyarországi fogadtatásának első évei (1859–1867) [First Years of the Reception of Darwinism in Hungary (1859–1867)]. In: Tasi István (ed.): *Az intelligens válasz* [Intelligent Answer]. Budapest, Kornétás, pp. 147–178.

Tasi István (2012): Benjamin Wiker: The Darwin Myth (book review). In: *Tattva* 15 (1), pp. 101–109.

Tasi István (2012): Bepillantás a darwinizmus morális és kulturális hatásairól szóló nemzetközi társadalomtudományi diskurzusba. In: *Tattva* 15 (1), pp. 75–88. [Glimps into the International Discourse in Social Sciences on the Moral and Cultural Effects of Darwinism.]

Tasi István (2013): Darwinok és darwinizmusok: Az evolúcióelmélet történeti szerepének értékelései [Darwins and Darwinisms: Evaluations of the Historical Role of the Evolution Theory]. In: Szász Antónia, Kirzsa Fruzsina (ed.): *Kultúrakutatás és narratíva* [Cultural Studies and Narrative]. Budapest, L'Harmattan, pp. 138–153.

Tasi István (2013): Mannhardt András: A kultúra elavulása: Evolúció és társadalom [Obsolescence of Culture: Evolution and Society] (book review). In: *Tattva* 16 (1) pp. 95–100.