

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Lecture

Dr Marek Kohn

Believing in Change: Darwin, Lincoln, Obama

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Report by Matthew Shelley

Dr Marek Kohn, author, journalist and Fellow of the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics at the University of Brighton was welcomed by Hector MacQueen, a Vice-President of the RSE. The lecture was the culmination of a day-and-a-half of activities, organised in conjunction with the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, that were devoted to Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. It provided a modern perspective on the issues of slavery, race and evolution that were such forces in the lives of both men, whose bicentenaries this year are backlit by the election of President Obama.

“One thing is for sure, we have known this was coming for a long time. The coincidence of the births of Darwin and Lincoln was noted 100 years ago, when their joint first centenaries were commemorated. But we’ve only known for one year, with the election of Barack Obama last November, that the day of the joint bicentennial would be bathed in the afterglow of the inauguration of the first African-American President of the United States.”

All three men are transformational figures and Obama’s achievement casts new light on the other two – not always on the aspects of their lives we hold most dear. Indeed, both would have found the election of an African-American president highly surprising, given the political conditions and racial divisions of their world. And when the US writer William Roscoe Thayer looked ahead to the Lincoln/Darwin centennial he saw it in racial terms. Thayer wanted to unite the USA and Britain in a “Pan-Anglo-Saxon reunion ... to feel the thrill of common hopes and common emotions, and to realise ... that blood is thicker than water.”

Obama’s challenge to his nation is to move beyond race without denying its significance in American life. As Lincoln’s successor in office he led the bicentennial celebrations. He has noted that Lincoln’s views on race were “limited” but has pointed to common ground – both recognise that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Obama presented Lincoln as a man who understood the proper balance between government and people. The view he expressed, seen with deep suspicion by many Americans, is that the state enables society to achieve what cannot be done by individual efforts alone.

During the election campaign scientists were heartened when *Nature* published Obama’s response to the questions:

- Do you believe that evolution by means of natural selection is a sufficient explanation for the variety and complexity of life on Earth?
- Should intelligent design, or some derivative thereof, be taught in science class in public schools?

Obama replied: “I believe in evolution, and I support the strong consensus of the scientific community that evolution is scientifically validated. I do not believe it is helpful to our students to cloud discussions of science with non-scientific theories such as intelligent design that are not subject to experimental scrutiny.” He was declaring that he valued the scientific criteria of knowledge.

As a President, whose style is distinctly cerebral, Obama pursues a foreign policy based on dialogue, inclusion and a readiness to re-set relations. This is something Lincoln and Darwin would have struggled to believe in, coming as they did from a world of aggressive empire-building and subjugated peoples. Darwin's vision, expressed in *The Descent of Man*, was that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races ...". Lincoln served in a military campaign against native Americans who were trying to recover their lands in Illinois.

The racial attitudes of Darwin, Lincoln and their contemporaries can be divided into morality, sympathy and nature, assuming different proportions in different minds. Some saw slavery as immoral, but lacked sympathy for slaves. Others saw those of African descent as inferior in intellect, yet thought it wrong to treat them as property. The British biologist Thomas Henry Huxley scorned equality saying that "our prognathous [projecting-jawed] relative" would never "be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites." Huxley believed slavery should end, to cleanse the Caucasian conscience. Darwin remarked positively about the intellects of black people he met, especially the "Negro or Mulatto children" who "examine every thing with the liveliest attention". Yet he accepted a conventional view of racial hierarchy in which negroes and Australians were lower races.

Lincoln was convinced of the inferiority of Africans and stated in 1858 that he opposed them being voters, jurors, office holders or inter-marrying with whites and even doubted that the two races could live together harmoniously. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass claimed his arguments against the extension of slavery "had their motive and mainspring in his patriotic devotion to the interests of his own race." Quite simply, slave-owning enterprises were out-competing those which had to hire labour. Yet Lincoln delivered emancipation, and his own views changed. In his last speech he discussed votes for blacks, though confined to ex-soldiers and those deemed the brightest. The story goes that his audience included the actor John Wilkes Booth, who was planning to kidnap the President to advance the Confederate cause, but was so outraged by talk of even limited citizenship that three days later he murdered Lincoln.

Segregation remained a legal reality in the USA until the 1960s, by which time racial science had largely been discarded. Scientists became doubtful that race was of much use as a concept in their research and declared that there was no evidence of significant mental differences between races. Most importantly the Nazis had "shown that racial science was infinitely worse than useless when applied to society".

Despite a widespread belief that science had decisively rejected racial difference, it persisted in a branch of psychology devoted to measuring intelligence. Its proponents argue that IQ tests provide reliable measurements of intelligence, that genetic factors are largely responsible for variations in intelligence between individuals, and that this genetic factor explains at least part of the gap between the average scores of black and white Americans. In 1994 Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray published *The Bell Curve*, which purported to show that very few black people would be part of the 'cognitive elite' of professionals and leaders. The counterarguments emphasised that environmental factors influence test scores and pointed to political motives behind the work. One civil rights lawyer and writer claimed that Murray was using his arguments to support welfare cuts and an end to affirmative action. That lawyer was Barack Obama.

Obama returned to the subject in 2008, pointing to inferior schools as a reason for the gap in achievement between black and white students. He argued that the income gap was partly a legacy of discrimination that had prevented black families from accumulating wealth they could pass on. He spoke of material circumstances and what it is like to live in those circumstances. Obama calls for change based on the idea that everyone can and should contribute to the collective good. It is an optimistic view of society, starkly opposed to the negative one that sees many as incapable of civic participation. He affirms human unity and insists that problems emerge from cultural, political and economic factors and not biology.

The visions of Darwin, Lincoln and Obama differed greatly. Lincoln called black leaders to the White House to tell them he could not countenance the idea of equality. Now the son of a mixed marriage occupies those same offices. And yet the idea that certain ethnic groups cannot live

together has a 21st-Century resonance. The differences may now be presented as cultural and religious, but they are treated as insurmountable.

Darwin saw change as “the source of life’s variety” and argued for human brotherhood. Despite the apparent triumph of his science it is still rejected by many with a religious view of the world’s origins. Like Lincoln, though, Darwin would have been surprised that a man of African descent would now hold the most powerful office in the world.

While race “is the obvious, insistent, nagging theme that connects the three figures” they are also linked by change. The changes have been immense. Yet Obama faces problems that are echoes from the days of Lincoln and Darwin. He seeks to tackle them in a way that upholds the best of the traditions for which they stood. And the three converge most closely in their shared belief in reason.

Questions:

- Asked about the link between colonialism, imperialism and racism Dr Kohn agreed that the concept of imperialism could offer valuable perspectives on the development of racial thought.
- On the issue of whether race is diminishing as a scientific issue, Dr Kohn said it has become more consolidated over the past 15 years. He added that it is ineffective to rely on old arguments that scientific racism is redundant and said that engagement is essential, or its proponents can develop their ideas unchallenged.
- Asked where the evidence comes from to combat continued racial claims, Dr Kohn asserted that we must look to science. He pointed to the work of psychologist James Flynn, which demonstrates that while IQ tests tell you something about likely success in the current social environment, they say little about intelligence.
- The evening concluded with a vote of thanks by Professor Susan Manning FRSE, Grierson Professor of English Literature & Director, The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh and member of RSE Council.

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