Midwives to modernity

Parsing the enduring legacies of Lincoln and Darwin

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  March 15, 2009

On Feb. 12, 1809, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were born, the American in a log cabin in Kentucky, the Englishman on a country estate. A birth date, Newsweek magazine declared last summer, was only one of many things they shared. Besides having the same astrological chart, the two great men, who never met, suffered from depression and wrestled with religious faith. Each had an uneasy relationship with his father, lost his mother at an early age, and grieved, inconsolably, at the death of his young child.

Lincoln and Darwin "have never been more present," Adam Gopnik, a contributor to the New Yorker, points out in "Angels and Ages," his elegant and engrossing bicentennial twin portrait. With reputations reduced to single words - Emancipation and Evolution - they have supplanted Marx and Freud as indispensable icons in the modern imagination. By advancing political and scientific liberalism, Lincoln and Darwin left as legacies an American century and a Darwinian world. Their principles, Gopnik maintains, still "shine light on the kind of place we've made, and the way we can make it better."

The literary eloquence of Lincoln and Darwin, moreover, was essential to their achievements. They wrote well because they saw clearly. They saw clearly because they swept away the cant of their day, started anew, and held themselves to the highest standards of observation, induction, and logic. Committed to persuasive argument, not as an instrument but as a central tenet of democratic liberalism, they exhibited an "urgency of utterance, obsessed by the need to see for themselves and to speak for us all."

Shying away from sweeping reinterpretations of Lincoln or Darwin, "Angels and Ages" is awash in celebratory common sense. Gopnik captures his subjects as at once men of their time, bourgeois family men, ambitious, proud, and prejudiced - and "amazing men, something more than heroes."

In the mid-19th century, Gopnik reminds us, slavery was the moral catastrophe, and racism a decidedly secondary problem. Lincoln managed to sidestep peripheral battles and unpopular arguments and to compromise when he had to while making relatively few concessions to racial prejudice. Responding to Stephen Douglas's race-baiting, he judged that differences between blacks and whites would probably make it impossible for them to live together in perfect equality. He was quick to add, however, that a black person was entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence: "in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man."

Less persuasive is Gopnik's claim that Lincoln embraced due process not only as the expression of a just society, but as the core component of it. He does not square his thesis with Lincoln's decision to invoke the war powers of the commander in chief, bypass Congress, impose a blockade on the South, increase the size of the Army and Navy, suspend the writ of habeas corpus, and authorize Cabinet officers to arrest civilians.

Lincoln, of course, was a war president. He had to expand executive authority, even at the expense of violating citizens' liberties, he insisted, or allow the federal government - and the Union - to go to pieces.

Gopnik's Darwin is more easily summed up. He was sensitive, intellectually curious, and unafraid to ask questions that might seem simple-minded. Darwin had the patience to measure and measure again; a zeal to put things in order; the ability to break down general propositions into specific instances and combine specific instances into general propositions; and a gift for storytelling.

Anticipating arguments that no one had yet made, Gopnik suggests, Darwin responded to proponents of "intelligent design." He demonstrated that dramatic changes happen undramatically, as species use antiquated structures for new purposes. The eye, for example, was formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications. A light-sensitive nerve was sufficient to begin the process, and many intermediate eyes exist.

For this reason, time - the slow modifications of natural selection - was what Darwin was really all about. From "The Origin of Species" through "The Formation of Vegetable Mold, Through the Action of Worms," he captured time moving at two speeds: "the vast abyss of time in which generations change and animals mutate and evolve," and the "gnat's-breath, hummingbird-heart time of creaturely existence." If in doing so Darwin alarmed advocates of an afterlife, he also energized earthly enthusiasts.
Lincoln and Darwin did not need the 20th century to teach them that progress is not written into the human genetic code. Nonetheless, they would have agreed, Gopnik concludes, that "there is more to man than the breath in his body if only the hat on his head, and the hope in his heart." And that evolutionary theory can say “that if we want the rule of law, free speech, and individual rights, equality of races and sexes, there is nothing in biology to tell us we can't.”

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