



The Social Relations of Evolutionary and Other Sciences: Six Historical Case Studies

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ABSTRACT Not only does sciences have a perceived and measurable effect on society, but society may have strong impact, economic, political or ideological, on science. This was especially true during the twentieth century, when the attitudes of society often impinged so markedly on the concepts and practice of science as to constitute ready encroachments on the freedom of science and scientists. Four “case histories” in this essay have to do with evolution: the role of catastrophism as a deterrent to the acceptance of Darwinism; the Tennessee legislation against the teaching of evolution, which the author shows was probably a direct consequence of the discovery of the Taung child skull in South Africa; the politico-ideological proscription of the use of the term “evolution” in South Africa over most of the second half of the twentieth century; and the effect of theology and creationism in delaying the acceptance of *Australopithecus* and of evolution in general. The other two “case histories” deal with the impact of modern human society, including political forces, on science: the lamentable case of the Khoi-san lady, Sarah Baartman, in the early nineteenth century, and the repatriation of her surviving bodily parts to her birthplace in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, early in the twenty-first century; and the clamour that arose in the middle of the twentieth century for curbs to be placed on the activities of scientists, in response to the dropping of the atomic and hydrogen bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945. It is concluded that scientists have an obligation to recognize their societal responsibilities, not only to ensure that they act conscientiously and ethically in their researches, but also and especially to inform and educate the public on the meaning of science, scientific methods, the fruits of their researches, and the potential of their scientific results for good, for health and for peace.

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