

The Doctoral School of History and the Department of History cordially invite you to the

Public Defense of the Doctoral Thesis in
History

by

Katalin Stráner

on

**Science, Translation and the Public: The Hungarian Reception of
Darwinism, 1858-1875**

will be held on

Monday, April 29, 2013 at 13:00

in the

**Gellner room
Central European University (CEU)
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Dissertation abstract

This study draws attention to the role of translation in the early reception of Darwinism in Hungary. Understanding translation as a form of cultural encounter, my dissertation examines the reception of Darwinism in the context of the transforming academic community and the public sphere from the early reception of evolutionary ideas in the 1850s until the publication of the Hungarian translation of *Origin of Species* in 1873. The involvement of the scientific community in informing and educating the public about the latest developments in the natural sciences is shown to be part of a patriotic agenda: by the late 1860s, the translation and adaptation of foreign scientific works became part of an emerging discourse of national progress fostered by the liberal political atmosphere following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. When József Somody's translation of *Vestiges of Creation* was published in 1858, Hungarian scientific life was held back by the practical consequences of political repression. Jácint Rónay's attempts to transfer the latest developments in the natural sciences from London to Pest in the early 1860s were not only hindered by circumstances and distance, but the attention of the public and the scientific community alike was too much caught up in the events leading up to the Compromise and the institutional reorganisation of scientific life. The Compromise was as much a landmark in modern Hungarian history as *Origin* was for modern science, and the 1850s and 1860s were significant for a number of developments not only in politics and culture, but also in science, especially in a sense of scientific theory and discovery related to fundamental nineteenth-century ideas of nation and progress. By the early 1870s, members of the Academy and the scientific societies were finally in a position to capitalize on the

critical point when the consequences of the Compromise permitted a new, open engagement with the natural sciences and their social and political implications. As Darwinism gradually entered not only scientific but also public discourse, the Darwinian concepts of progress and development became part of the rhetorical apparatus of social and political reform agendas in late nineteenth century Hungary.

My dissertation presents a series of linked case studies of early evolutionary narratives published in the Hungarian language between 1858 and 1873, against the changing discourse of the historical period following the fall of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in 1849, through the years of Neoabsolutism marked with political repression and censorship, leading up to the political consolidation of the mid-1870s that followed the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. Through the analysis of three main evolutionary texts, very different in character due to the historical circumstances and to the agendas of their creators, the focus of my attention is directed toward the early stage of the reception of Darwinism in Hungary: from the publication of *Vestiges of Creation* in 1858 to Jácint Rónay's work on *The Formation of Species* in the early 1860s, and ending with László Dapsy's translation of *Origin of Species* in 1873. The dissertation examines the reception of scientific ideas in the contextual space of the interaction of the scientific community and public life. Each text was published in a different stage of the early Hungarian reception of evolutionary thought, strongly interlinked with the political and social circumstances of the period, which permitted very different ranges of reception by the public. The case studies are linked not only by the evolutionary theme and the discourses of progress and development they each touched upon, but also by the evolution of the

scientific discussions and the public discourse of Darwinism. As the dissertation aims to show, the scientific and popular reception of Darwinism was inextricably related by men of letters, public intellectuals acting as agents of translation, scientific discussion and the public dissemination of Darwin's work in Hungary.

Through examination of different translation practices and examples of the cultural relocation process, my aim is to explore the process of transplantation of Darwinism to Hungarian soil. Through in-depth treatment of some of the "great texts" of nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking, I will address the wider question of how the role and modes of translation, the agendas of the translator, the scientific community and other agents of reception, and the local context, such as the political and social circumstances, affected the dissemination of Darwinism in Hungary. By engaging with the relevance and consequences of this transplantation and the transformations of the evolutionary discourse in the first fifteen years of Hungarian Darwinism, this work makes a contribution not only to the reevaluation of the role of Darwinism in the emergence of Hungarian national discourse of progress in the nineteenth century, but also to the recent efforts to reevaluate the nature of national receptions of Darwinism in an age when the interdisciplinary (re)interpretations of Darwinism have an increasing relevance to the study of history as well.

The first chapter serves a double purpose: on one hand, it surveys the reception of Darwinism and earlier nineteenth-century approaches to the evolution of life on earth in Hungary until the mid-1870s using primarily periodical press sources; on the other hand, it serves to provide historical and contextual background to the chronologically-ordered case studies of the following chapters. The focus of the presentation is on efforts to disseminate

Darwin's theories in the public space, drawing attention to how, in the early years, the entanglement of the scholarly and the popular reception of Darwin was part of a patriotic agenda of certain members and institutions of the scientific community.

The second chapter gives an account of the translation and reception of *Vestiges of Creation* in Hungary. Although arguably less extraordinary than the waves its sensational original made in Britain, I argue that despite the relative silence surrounding it, József Somody's 1858 translation holds an important place in the Hungarian reception of Darwinism as an important and almost immediate precursor to the discussions that would start about Darwin's work in a year or two. More than a placeholder for *Origin of Species*, the existence of such a translation shows that Darwin's work did not appear in a vacuum, and moreover, it demonstrates that the import of scientific knowledge was not limited to the scientific elite, even though they had a crucial role in public dissemination.

The third chapter presents the work of Jácint Rónay, a transitional figure of Hungarian Darwinism whose body of work includes a variety of evolutionary texts influenced by the Victorian approach to the natural history of the world before and after *Origin of Species*. Rónay, who spent more than fifteen years in exile in London after 1849, could observe and participate in a wide range of scientific events and societies in London, and his work reflects not only some of the content, but also the style of his literary and scholarly studies. Of his two longer evolutionary works analysed in the chapter, the first, *A tűzimádó bölcs és az ős-világok emlékei* [The fire-worshipping wise man and the remains of ancient worlds, 1858] is a variation of the romantic evolutionary epics popular in the 1850s following the fashion of *Vestiges of Creation*, and the second, *Fajkeletkezés* [The formation

of species, 1864], is a work of undecided genre and originality, a transitional work that is at once the first translation, first adaptation, and first review of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

The fourth chapter, through analysis of László Dapsy's translation of *Origin of Species*, the publication of which signaled the end of the first stage of the reception of Darwinism in Hungary, presents not only the first full translation of Darwin's work in Hungarian, but puts it into the context of the scientific community and their efforts to disseminate scientific thought through the publication of entire books on contemporary scientific thought considered crucial for Hungarian intellectual progress. Their efforts to reach an unexpectedly wide public were successful even though Dapsy, the initiator of the project, failed in the sense that his agenda to translate instead of produce original works was considered problematic by the scientific community and the public alike. Dapsy's *Origin* and his agenda is also treated in comparison to other contemporary translation of *Origin*, especially to the German translations that he himself consulted as well. The chapter will show that Dapsy, an influential figure of the public reception of Darwinism in the 1860s, failed to capitalise on the public interest in Darwin's work for his own purposes. Instead of introducing the Hungarian public to *Descent of Man* and the new discourse of Darwinism in the early 1870s, Dapsy's *Origin* became the conclusion to the first stage of the reception of Darwinism in Hungary.

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Areas of Research Interest:

- Modern European History
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Education:

2006 to present: CEU, Budapest, Hungary

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Professional & Research experience:

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September 2010 Short-term Research Grant, CEU

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2002-2003 Kellner Scholarship, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, USA

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16 March 2012 “Darwin in Budapest: People, Institutions and Networks in the 1870s,” International Workshop *Darwin in Cities, 1859-1830*, University of Bochum

15 December 2011 “Darwinism, Translation and the Hungarian Scientific Community in the 19th Century,” Lecture, Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research, Vienna

12 March 2010 “Darwinism and Literary Culture in Late-19th Century Hungary,” Colloquium on *The Cultural Impact of Darwin and Darwinism in Europe*, Cambridge

28-29 August 2009 “Science in Hungarian Translation: *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*” (in Hungarian), *The History of Communication*, Annual Conference of the István Hajnal Society for Social History, Miskolc

3-4 April 2009 “Translating Darwin: Reception in 19th Century Hungary,” *The Reception of Darwinism: Trans-Cultural Differences*, Boston Colloquium on the History and Philosophy of Science, Boston, MA

Conference Organisation:

1-4 November 2012 Science and Scandal: Scientific Controversy in the Urban Space, Session at the 5th International Conference of the European Society for the History of Science, Athens (with Markian Prokopovych)

18-19 October 2012 Nomadic Concepts: Biological Concepts and their Careers Beyond Biology, Herder Institute for the History of East-Central Europe, Marburg (with Jan Surman)

18-20 November 2010 Darwin in Urban Contexts, 1859-1930, Session at the 4th International Conference of the European Society for the History of Science, Barcelona (with Hans Henrik Hjermitsev and Daniel Schümann)

Publications:

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Languages:

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