



Evolutionary activism: Stephen Jay Gould, the New Left and sociobiology

Myrna Perez*

Harvard University, History of Science, Science Center 371, 1 Oxford st., Cambridge, MA 02138, United States

The sociobiology debate, which erupted out of Cambridge, Massachusetts in the mid-1970s, captured all the most potent issues of the day: racial tension, gender relations and the trustworthiness of science. Its proponents were often surprised to find themselves lumped in with more conservative elements of American culture, after all the point of sociobiology was to stress the universality of human nature based on the evolutionary patterns laid down by our immediate ancestors, not to emphasize human difference. This image, though separated from the events of the sociobiology controversy by more than a decade, captures the primary issues of the sociobiology controversy and Stephen Jay Gould's participation in the debate. It was taken in 1964 at a sit-in Gould participated in to integrate an Ohio barbershop (Figure 1). Gould was part of a generation of college students actively involved in the Civil Rights and student protest movements, whose frustrations with conventional racial and gender relations found expression in acts of social activism. Largely comprised of white, middle-class college students, the New Left movement centered around personal fulfillment, questioning traditional racial and gender dynamics, and criticizing the involvement of the United States in foreign conflicts, particularly Vietnam. It was new, in that it contrasted with earlier leftist movements that had focused mostly on labor unionization and issues of social class.¹

Sociobiology proponents argued that human social behavior was largely genetic and derived from evolutionary patterns set by prehistoric human conditions.

Critics of sociobiology believed this view of social relationships made it impossible (or at the least very difficult) to effect social progress and disrupt traditional racial, class and gender hierarchies. For people of Gould's generation and social background, whose intellectual orientation had been largely formed by an activist culture, this apparent use of biology was unacceptable. No matter that its theorists insisted over and over again that the nuanced versions of the theory did not promote uncompromising genetic determinism for human societies. Gould and other critics of sociobiology believed strongly that the existing conditions in American society were unfair, and more, that they could be changed. They did not want a biology that purported to describe the universal reasons for human behavior, for human action and human social relations in such a way as to validate the status quo.

Gould was in the middle of the 1970s debate over sociobiology for several reasons. He was openly critical in many of his own popular writings of both the biological assertions and potential political uses of sociobiology. He was also a professor in Harvard University's biology department, and therefore a colleague of Edward O. Wilson, whose book *Sociobiology: a new synthesis* generated the controversy.² Wilson considered sociobiology to be both the natural continuation of the modern synthesis, as well as a way to replace sociology and the humanities with a research program on human sociality grounded in evolution.³ The book was published in June of 1975, and for the first few months it received generally favorable, although not uncritical reviews in the academic and mainstream presses. Nina McCain of the Boston Globe commented that the book had 'created quite a stir in academic circles; several officials at Harvard University Press... predict it will be an important scientific volume.'⁴ *The New York Book Review* called Wilson's book an "outstanding survey addressed primarily to students and scientists but including much that will inform and intrigue serious lay readers", but also noted that "Wilson falters somewhat in presenting the human story."⁵ In order to combat this favorable press, Gould joined with another Harvard biologist, Richard Lewontin and the Cambridge Sociobiology Study Group in a series of protests and critiques of Wilson and his book. The group contested that Wilson's biology encouraged and promulgated a dangerous form of biological determinism. Most famously in 1975, Gould joined with other members of the SSG and sent a letter addressed to the editors of *The New York Review of Books* ⁶ in response to a review of Wilson's book. Their letter set off a flurry of debate and publicity over sociobiology.

This paper focuses on the issues of professional values and scientific identity in the sociobiology controversy in order to emphasize what the episode reveals about Gould's own career trajectory and also what it suggests generally about the relationship between public engagement and scientific credibility. The central incident in question is Gould's choice to address the scientific debate in a May 1976 piece for his popular column for *Natural History*

² Edward O. Wilson. *Sociobiology: the New Synthesis*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975).

³ Ibid, p. 4–6.

⁴ Nina McCain, *Sociobiology: New theory on man's motivation*, Boston Globe, July 13, 1975.

⁵ John Pfeiffer, *Sociobiology*, *The New York Times Book Review*, July 27, 1975, p. BR4.

⁶ Allen, Elizabeth et al. (1975) *Against Sociobiology* letter to editor of *New York Review of Books* 22 (Nov. 23): 284–186. The letter was written in response to a review of Wilson's book: C.H. Waddington. *Mindless Societies* *The New York Review of Books*.

*Tel.: +1 619 244 0593.

¹ John Campbell McMillian and Paul Buhle, *The new left revisited* (Temple University Press, 2003).



Figure 1. Barbershop sit-in Yellow Springs, Ohio 1964, Kept by SJ Gould in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. Reproduced with permission from Rhonda R. Shearer.

Magazine. In the essay, titled “Biological Potential vs. Biological Determinism”, Gould asserted it was the intense discussion and chorus of praise and publicity aroused by the publication of Wilson’s *Sociobiology* that led him to take up the subject.⁷ He told his readers that although most of *Sociobiology* “won from him the same high praise almost universally accorded it” the last chapter on human social evolution “left him very unhappy indeed.”⁸

Utilizing this episode as a way into the controversy, I argue that Gould’s background as a New Left activist is key to understanding the way in which he participated in the debate over sociobiology. Neil Jumonville has argued that academics whose work was important before the cultural revolution of the mid 1960s tended to ascribe to a liberal universalism that stressed the similarity between people.⁹ Whereas younger scholars, such as Gould, who came to faculty positions in the 1970s and after, were more likely to be committed to an ethnos-centered social vision that stressed identity politics. This separation in visions for what would constitute a liberal American society was the key to the divide amidst liberal academics in this period. I argue that this division is crucial for understanding the broader context for Gould’s views on the proper relationship between biology and politics, as well as between biologists and their publics. Gould saw biological knowledge as a participant in the larger cultural conversation about human identity and social policy, rather than a universalizable set of objective premises that should be unilaterally adopted by the general American public.¹⁰

⁷ Stephen Jay Gould. Biological Potential vs. biological determinism. *Natural History* 85 (5) 1974:24–31 (Reprinted in *Ever Since Darwin* [1977]. New York: W.W. Norton, 251–259).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Neil Jumonville, The cultural politics of the sociobiology debate, *Journal of the History of Biology* 35, no. 3 (2002): 569–593.

¹⁰ Gould, SJ On biological and social determinism in *History of Science* (1974) 11:212–20, Gould, SJ Issues raised by biology. Review of D. Hull, *Philosophy of biological science*. *Science* (1974) 186:45–46.

Additionally, there are three key elements to understanding the interplay between professional scientific values, evolutionary biology and American society in this episode. First, it is essential to recognize the importance of Gould’s radicalism as a student and how this background of activism manifested in his early years at Harvard. His correspondence, and protest materials from his time at Antioch College, reveal much about this connection. Second, this episode highlights the generally contentious nature of popular scientific publishing, particularly over controversial material. Gould’s arguments with Wilson over the decision to publish on the sociobiology controversy emphasize the continuing debates and uncertainties through this period over the appropriate arenas for scientists to legitimately express opposition to one another. And finally, the particularly of the sociobiology controversy – its connection to general debates over race, gender and science in American society – demonstrate the growing fears about the political implications of scientific research during the 1970s.

Gould and the New Left: undergraduate years at Antioch College

Gould’s papers from his students day reveal how keenly being a student activist shaped his academic life, his political orientation and his understanding of the relationship between science and society. He came from a New York family which was self-consciously left oriented, a perspective which came to fruition during his undergraduate education at Antioch College, which he attended from 1959 to 1963.¹¹ Antioch, a private liberal arts college located in Yellow Springs, Ohio, was considered a bastion of progressive thought, social activism and defense of free speech. It provided a holistic, liberal approach to education that emphasized small classroom settings and communal governance rather than competition and achievement.¹² The college administration considered it very important in the process of education for students to involve themselves in matters of social action.¹³ This educational setting emphasized to Gould and his fellow students the importance of self-initiative and community action. Gould’s undergraduate days demonstrate a concrete connection between his association with the Sociobiology Study Group at Harvard, and his intellectual formation. It was this New Left activism that provided the foundation and context for Gould’s actions as well as for the other members of the SSG during the sociobiology controversy. The tenor of their criticism of Wilson and Sociobiology is more comprehensible if viewed from the perspective of this late 1960s activist background.

A number of national student activist groups had chapters on Antioch’s campus. Gould was a member and active participant in two student groups, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Peace Union (SPU), as well as a member of the Congress for Racial Equality

¹¹ Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*. 1ST ed. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

¹² Algo Donmyer Henderson, *Antioch college: its design for liberal education* (Harper & brothers, 1964).

¹³ Antioch College Community Council in *Antioch Notes* Vol 38, May 191, Number 8 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 122, Folder 10–12 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

(CORE). Students for a Democratic Society were the iconic New Left organization, and the most important student activist group from the mid to late 1960s in the US.¹⁴ In 1965 SDS chapters around the country began organizing marches against the Vietnam War in response to President Lyndon Johnson's dramatic escalation of the US military action with the bombing of North Vietnam in Operation Flaming Dart.¹⁵ The Student Peace Union was a nationwide student organization active on college campuses in the US from 1959 to 1964, with headquarters located near the campus of the University of Chicago. By December 1961 the group had 1500 members in campuses in the midwest and northeast and a year later expanded to 3500 inroads to the west coast and the south.¹⁶ In October of 1962, they organized demonstrations across the country during the Cuban Missile crisis, including a march in front of the White House that drew 2000 people. The Congress for Racial Equality was a pivotal player in the organization of the Civil Rights Movement. Gould attended meetings for these groups, kept literature on racism in society and threw himself into the left wing activities of his undergraduate institution.¹⁷ In 1962, during his junior year, Gould participated in several demonstrations organized by the Student Peace Union against American nuclear weapons in Cuba.¹⁸

As an undergraduate, Gould had the freedom, both in terms of time and professional expectations, to devote to social activism in a way that he would not in any of his subsequent academic settings Columbia, Harvard and finally, New York University. However, he kept much of the sentiment and perspective from these years into his later days. As with many college students of the time, Gould's social activism was sandwiched by his studies which included rigorous courses in physics, calculus, philosophy of science and geology. His love for the historical sciences developed early in his years at Antioch and would be a passion through the rest of his life.¹⁹ But his social activism would not take the same form later in his career as it had during his undergraduate years. His concern for social equality, racism and biological determinism would be channeled into academic avenues and would more explicitly incorporate his identity as an evolutionary expert and university professor. However, this time cemented for Gould a leftist orientation and a value placed on concrete action for social causes.

It was through his involvement in CORE and SDS that Gould participated in sit-ins from 1960 to 1964 to integrate a barbershop in the small town of Yellow Springs, Ohio where Antioch's campus was located. The owner of the



Figure 2. Photo from Gegner Barbershop with undergraduate Gould in upper left corner in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. Reproduced with permission from Rhonda R. Shearer.

barbershop, Mr. Gegner refused to cut black men's hair, despite laws against segregation in Ohio. Mr. Gegner said that he did not have the appropriate knowledge to cut a black person's hair, because it was significantly different from a white person's hair. Students from Antioch saw this incident, though relatively small, as a quintessential symbol of Civil Rights issues. For weeks they staged sit-ins at the barbershop. Gould kept the organizational materials from the sit-ins, including a schematic of the barbershop and his own seat location. He also kept a series of photos from the sit-in, one of which shows an undergraduate Gould in the corner, watching the events unfold (Figure 2).

Gould and his fellow students were conscious of taking an active role in the making of American identity, of changing the path of American history, and they placed themselves into a grand narrative of a fight for equality. This is clear from a letter Gould wrote to two fellow Antioch students at the climax of the protests. The sit-ins occurred weekly, but Gould was back home in New York, already doing graduate work at Columbia when the barbershop closed its doors to national attention in March of 1964. After seeing the news on television, Gould sent a letter to two fellow Antioch students who had organized the sit-ins. The letter reveals how conscious Gould was of the shape and importance of media attention, even at this early stage of his academic life.

He wrote, It's terribly hard to judge sitting in the midst of SW Ohio, but from a New York standpoint let me tell you that this is the number one national civil rights story of this week. You (or rather let me vainly say we) were the second item on news broadcasts through the evening, second only to Ruby's conviction²⁰ not self contained but to be viewed as an integral part of the most important national struggle of the century.²¹

¹⁴ Students for a Democratic Society (U.S.), The Port Huron statement: (1962) (C.H. Kerr, 1990).

¹⁵ Miller, James. *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Student Peace Union national convention, April 27–29, 1962, Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

¹⁷ Literature kept by Gould on activities in CORE and SDS in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 10–12 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

¹⁸ Material from Cuba sit-in in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 12–14 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

¹⁹ Letter from Stephen Jay Gould to Eleanor Gould before June 1963 Box 122, Folder 16 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 12–14 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

²⁰ Gould is referred to the conviction of Jack Ruby of murder with malice on March 14, 1964. Jack Ruby killed Lee Harvey Oswald, who was believed to be the sniper who assassinated President John F. Kennedy. The conviction of Ruby was a story of such massive importance, it is noteworthy the Gegner barbershop closing made an impact at all.

²¹ Letter to Joel and Dick March 15, 1964 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 6 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

The story of the barbershop was also covered in the *New York Times*, on March 16, the day after Gould's letter to his fellow students. The headline announced, "Ohio Barber Shop Shut in Protests – Students Object to Owner's Refusal to Serve Negroes: The decision to close his shop, site of almost weekly demonstrations, came not long after 1500 silent marchers demonstrated in this southwestern Ohio county seat." Gould's response to the media coverage of the sit-in was captured in a letter he wrote to the *Times* editor.²² With his letter he enclosed a clipping from the *London Observer*, in order to emphasize the international importance of the story to the *Times* editor.

"[The clipping] appeared on page 1 of the *Sunday Observer* (roughly equivalent to the *Sunday NY Times* in prestige & popularity)... In view of the international impact of these demonstrations, I am particularly grateful that those taking part acted with such courage and dignity. This was, perhaps, our finest hour & shall surely be remembered when the history of this nation's victory over bigotry is written.²³ It was an exciting moment for Gould and his fellow students, and for Gould a fitting culmination of four years filled with protests, sit-ins, lectures and agitations for social progress."

Gould was bound up in significant changes in the liberal vision for American Society. His leftist background was something he readily acknowledged through the rest of his career. During the peak of the sociobiology debate he described himself as belonging to the New Left in a letter to Wilson.²⁴ The SSG and Gould were continuing the same type of grassroots, community-action against perceived instances of racism and sexism that had fueled social change a decade earlier. However, Gould was much less involved with the SSG than he had been with the activist organizations of his college years. The expectations for his time and activity were quite different once he was a professor at Harvard.

Early days at Harvard and *Natural History*

It was only after gaining tenure that Gould added another facet to his professional identity – he became a scientist who was also a popular writer. His column "This View of Life ran" from 1974 to 2001 in *Natural History*, the magazine for the American Natural History Museum. Gould was known to a large readership through this column, and subsequent bound editions (including *Ever Since Darwin*, *The Panda's Thumb* and *The Flamingo's Smile*). This did not happen immediately upon becoming a faculty member at Harvard in 1967. His letters to Ernst Mayr during his transition from graduate student at Columbia University and researcher at the American Museum of Natural History to a Harvard faculty member were earnest and

²² Ohio Barber Shop Shut in Protest *New York Times* Monday, March 16, 1964. Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 6 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

²³ Stephen Jay Gould letter to the *New York Times* March 15, 1964. Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 122, Folder 16, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

²⁴ Letter from Stephen Jay Gould to Edward O. Wilson March 17, 1964. in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

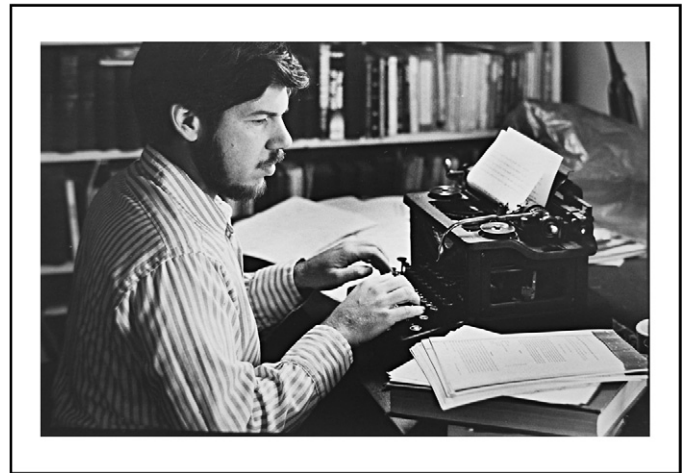


Figure 3. Gould at writing desk Box 615, Folder 5 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

Reproduced with permission from Rhonda R. Shearer.

even eager for the professional life ahead.²⁵ His publication record during this period was mostly technical, and included papers on his beloved land snails and reports on trips to Jamaica for field research.²⁶ In other words, by the early 1970s, Gould's career was following the lines of a prototypical museum-based, field-oriented evolutionary biologist and paleontologist from his generation. Gould was on the rise, as a successful faculty member, but toward tenure, not toward fame and public prominence. Later in his career Gould developed strategies for dealing with the overwhelming influx of requests for his time requests for book reviews, for comments on manuscripts, speaking engagements, visiting faculty positions and board appointments. But Gould before 1974 didn't have the name in academic and public circles that he would later (Figure 3).

Gould began writing for *Natural History* magazine in the fall of 1973, and his first piece "Size and Shape" was published in the January issue of 1974 (Figure 3). He had been approached by Alan Ternes, the editor of the *Natural History* about the idea of working for the magazine. Gould proposed to Ternes "a column firmly based in evolutionary theory and its implications but trying to synthesize under that rubric my divergent interests in the history and philosophy of science, social and political questions bearing upon scientific issues, and the phenomena of life's history on a grand scale." Ternes was amenable and told "Gould to try a couple." After Gould had written a draft of the first three, he told Ternes that he had had enough fun to be willing to continue writing them on a monthly basis. His only concern was a name for the recurring column; he wanted to use Darwin's characterization of evolution – "This View of Life", but worried that it had been preempted by George Gaylord Simpson a few years earlier for a book title. However, he set aside that worry, and the column was born with Darwin's phrase as its title.

²⁵ Stephen Jay Gould to Ernst Mayr, August 7, 1967, Ernst Mayr Papers, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, HUGFP 74.6, Box 14, Folder 926.

²⁶ Stephen Jay Gould, Allometry in Pleistocene land snails from Bermuda: The influence of size upon shape. *Journal of Paleontology* 40: 1131–41. 1967.

Although from early in his academic life Gould had been noted for having an accessible writing style, his voice was by no means immediately suited to the tone of the magazine. His very first piece was edited for him by Ternes with these notes: “Two principles were involved in editing: to shorten it slightly, and to make it readable to a wider audience.” Ternes would continue to be an active and forthright editor of Gould’s work, another piece written in 1975 would earn Gould these comments, “This was, I think one of the hardest editing jobs you’ve presented to me. It has, as you’ll see, been worked over heavily. I would rather not do such editing, but something had to be done, in my opinion.”²⁷ Gould’s writing style was sculpted and crafted, by both him and his editors to meet the perceived needs of the *Natural History* readers.

Gould’s impression of the readers of his column came largely through the mail he received in response to the columns each month, either sent directly to him or forwarded by the editorial staff. Over the course of the column Gould would receive thousands of letters, from a variety of people. Many were fellow biologists and other natural scientists or academics; others were simply interested lay persons’. Gould noted this when reading his very first piece fan mail. In a letter to Ternes he remarked, “I think you have convinced me that the intelligent layman is not a myth, and that your magazine really does have a fascinating constituency.”²⁸ Gould exchanged letters with many of his readers; a few exchanges resulted in correspondences of several years in length. Indeed, in the decade after the start of the column, it was letters to and from readers along with exchanges with professional biologists that equally dominated Gould’s daily letter writing.

Eventually Gould’s column would run for 300 issues, and be bound into ten *New York Times* bestselling volumes. It was also turned into a NOVA special in 1984. The column formed the foundation for Gould’s public intellectual voice, and changed the course of his career from the typical route of an academic biologist. Indeed, before he took on the column, Gould reflected on the change the publishing regime would bring to his life; for instance the demanding schedule would prohibit him from taking extended research trips in the field.²⁹ He was also concerned that writing the column might make him seem like a less serious scientist. However, once he took on the task, Gould stood by the decision, and would assert throughout his career that he saw his popular and his professional work in the same sphere.²⁹ Several historians have argued that exploring public scientific figures, instead of reifying the concept, provides an opportunity for investigating the public appeal of scientific knowledge in specific historical contexts. David K. Hecht’s study of the public discourse around Rachel Carson and Silent Spring argues that it was largely Caron’s identities as a reluctant crusader and scientist-poet that legitimated her as both an admirable

person and admirable scientist in public debates over the environmental consequences of DDT.³⁰ Gould developed a persona as a kind of quirky and energetic polymath – a evolutionist who sang in the Cecilia choir one moment and a devoted Yankees fan who dashed off to Jamaica in between Harvard undergrad courses and writing books. By the end of this period Gould’s many disciplinary and personal identities were mixed together to create a picture of a sage yet relatable man, filled with a wisdom for the ages, even the cosmos, whose life and work were worth pursuing by his audience.

Sociobiology

By the end of 1975 Gould had written several pieces for *Natural History* on racism and biological determinism, in which he reprimanded scientists for legitimizing racial conclusions with the credibility of biological knowledge. He saw “Biological Potential vs. Biological Determinism,” as continuing the same vein of reasoned critique as those earlier columns (Figure 4). Before its publication, in early March of 1976 Gould sent a draft of the column along with a letter to Wilson, “I debated intensely with myself before writing [the May column] at all. . . At this point I wish nothing more than restored harmony, lest what we have built as the finest department of evolutionary biology be swallowed up in personal animosity. . . Nonetheless, I realized one day that I am the only popularist writing a regular feature on evolution how could I ignore the mostly widely discussed event. . . in evolutionary biology during my brief career?”³¹

Although he acknowledged the acrimony that the conflict had created within the biology department, Gould temporarily set aside the burden of his professional obligations for what he termed an even greater duty as the “only popularist writing a regular feature on evolution”. In this contentious moment, Gould chose to emphasize his identity as a popularizer, and his general audience over his place as a professor of biology and an academic colleague. The tension between those two sets of obligations continued through the rest of Gould’s career. But it was a tension that Wilson saw as a direct moral conflict, and which he took Gould to task for in his reply.³² Wilson wrote that he was appalled to receive the article and outlined why he felt Gould’s publication in a popular magazine was professionally unsound and morally questionable: “The department is embroiled in a bitter struggle over the political issue of sociobiology. Considerable harm is being done to evolutionary biology here because of the highly personal nature of that struggle.”³³

²⁷ Letter from Alan Ternes to Stephen Jay Gould 20 October 1975 in n Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 230, Folder 2 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

²⁸ Letter from Stephen Jay Gould to Harry Power September 10, 1985 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 111, Folder 5 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

²⁹ Everett Mendelsohn interview with author, 13 October, 2011 Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³⁰ Hecht, D.K. Constructing a Scientist: Expert Authority and Public Images of Rachel Carson. *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 41, no. 3 (2011): 277–302.

³¹ Letter from Edward O. Wilson to Stephen Jay Gould on March 16, 1976 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 230, Folder 2 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

³² Science for the People was a New Left organization that was primarily concerned to end oppression (or potential oppression) by the misuse of science and corrupt science. The Sociobiology Study Group reported its activities to the SftP, though it was by no means governed by the larger organization. The SftP garnered more criticism than the SSG for radical activities, and Gould was always clear to distance himself from the former.

³³ Letter from Edward O. Wilson to Stephen Jay Gould on March 16, 1976 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 149, Folder 8 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

This View of Life

by Stephen Jay Gould

Biological Potentiality vs. Biological Determinism

Because of its social and political implications, the debate about determinism continues

In 1758, Linnaeus faced the difficult decision of how to classify his own species in the definitive edition of his *Systema Naturae*. Would he simply rank man among the other animals or would he create for us a separate status? Linnaeus compromised. He placed us within his classification (close to monkeys and bats), but set us apart by his description. He defined our relatives by the mundane, distinguishing characters of size, shape, and number of fingers and toes. For *Homo sapiens*, he wrote only the Socratic injunction: *nosce te ipsum*—"know thyself."

For Linnaeus, *Homo sapiens* was both special and not special. Unfortunately, this eminently sensible resolution has been polarized and utterly distorted by most later commentators. Special and not special have come to mean nonbiological and biological, or nurture and nature. These later polarizations are nonsensical. Humans are animals and everything we do lies within our biological potential. Nothing arouses this ardent (although currently displaced) New Yorker to greater anger than the claims of some self-styled "ecocritics" that large cities are the

The intense discussion aroused by E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* has led me to take up this subject. Wilson's book has been greeted by a chorus of praise and publicity (for example, the review by R.S. Morison in the November 1975 issue of *Natural History*). I, however, find myself among the smaller group of its detractors. Most of *Sociobiology* wins from me the same high praise almost universally accorded to it. For a lucid account of evolutionary principles and an indefatigably thorough discussion of social behavior among all groups of animals, *Sociobiology* will be the primary document for years to come. But Wilson's last chapter, "From Sociobiology to Sociology," leaves me very unhappy indeed. After twenty-six chapters of careful documentation for the nonhuman animals, Wilson concludes with an extended speculation on the genetic basis of supposedly universal patterns of human behavior. Unfortunately, since this chapter is his statement on human behavior, it has also attracted more than 80 percent of all the commentary in the popular press.

We who have criticized this last chapter have been accused of denying altogether the relevance of biology to human behavior, of reviving an ancient superstition by placing man outside the rest of "the creation." Are we pure "nurturists?" Do we permit

issues at stake. Further he thought Gould's actions betrayed Gould's position as a Harvard biology professor. Ultimately Wilson believed it inappropriate for Gould to use his position as an established and trusted columnist to put forth his own views on what had become a controversial topic. Gould quickly responded, assuring Wilson that he had meant for Wilson to have the opportunity to write a reply for *Natural History*. He also attempted to diffuse the rising personal tensions, telling Wilson, "I can only say that I feel no personal animosity toward you whatsoever, and that I would welcome a renewed personal contact with you."³⁵

Wilson drafted a reply to the column in the form of a letter, and sent it to Gould's editor Alan Ternes, at *Natural History*. Wilson's response centered on informing the readers of *Natural History* of Gould's activist and political orientation. He did not write a reply to the ideas in Gould's piece, but addressed himself to Gould's audience, the readers of *Natural History*, in front of whom Wilson felt he was about to be unjustly maligned. Wilson wanted to exonerate his motivations for sociobiological research for Gould's audience: "[Sociobiologists] are equally concerned with social justice and hopeful for human progress, and if anything they have taken a more responsible attitude toward the drawing of ethical guidelines for research in the young and growing discipline in which they work."³⁶

Wilson believed biologists were responsible enough to regulate the ethics of their own proceedings. Wilson described Gould as being in a minority position in the biological community, part of a vocal, but small group casting doubt on what Wilson characterized as relatively established scientific consensus.³⁷ Wilson suggested to the *Natural History* readers that Gould's political activism had put him outside the fold of the biological community.

Wilson sent the draft to Ternes and requested that it be published only if Gould not be allowed to publish a follow-up rebuttal. Wilson felt *it would be very unfair to me to have my brief reply sandwiched in between his May 1976 column and then a reply to my reply*.³⁸ But Ternes had his own set of editorial preferences and he did not want the conversation to be strung along to further issues of the magazine. Ternes argued that the logical place for a reply from Gould would be in the Letters column following Wilson's letter in the same and pointed out that this was fairly standard journalistic practice.³⁹ The whole thing had degenerated

Figure 4. Edited copy of 'Biological Potential vs. Biological Determinism' in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

Reproduced with permission from Rhonda R. Shearer.

In his reply, Wilson went on to vehemently argue that Gould was misusing his status and ready audience of the *Natural History* column, to argue for Gould's own side in what Wilson thought should be a strictly biological debate, "You are continuing a partisan attack, essentially identical in its arguments to that used by Science for the People, in an important forum where I will have no chance to reply. . . . It appears to me that you are showing not only poor judgment with reference to your own university but also dubious ethics in promoting your point of view concerning a highly political, controversial topic."³⁴

Wilson's letter revealed a serious concern that Gould's piece in *Natural History* would introduce the controversy to a public that was unprepared to filter or understand the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Letter from Stephen Jay Gould to Edward O. Wilson March 17, 1976 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 149, Folder 8 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ A recent book on the relationship between public doubt, media coverage and scientific consensus that takes the position that the scientific community should be allowed to dictate consensus through its own means without government or special interest interference: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury USA, 2011). Oreskes and Conway would likely agree with Wilson's perspective on the Sociobiology debate.

³⁸ Letter from Edward O. Wilson to Alan Ternes in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

³⁹ Letter from Alan Ternes to Edward O. Wilson in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437, Box 230, Folder 2 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

into an argumentative mess. However, there was to be no rebuttal; before the column came out, Wilson informed Ternes that he would withdraw his reply to the column. He forwarded the withdrawal to Gould with a note, "I believe the time has come to relieve personal tensions, and I hope the attached letter will help."⁴⁰

Wilson's letter never ran in the *Natural History* magazine. "Biological Potential vs. Biological Determinism" was published and included as a part of the SSG's list of its publications for the next several years. Wilson's letter to Gould had expressed a concern that Gould was unfairly using the *Natural History* column as a soapbox from which to promulgate criticism of Wilson. Gould was introducing controversy into an ostensibly popular venue, but with two mediating circumstances. First, the column was not in a widely circulated mainstream daily newspaper, or news magazine with the reach of *Time* or *Newsweek*. Thus, many of the fan responses that Gould received about the column were interested lay persons, but only in the sense of being non-biologists. Many were academics in other disciplines, who were well informed of both the political implications and historical background of the sociobiology debate. And their letters to Gould were as likely to be highly critical of him as not. One reader, a history professor at Georgia State, wrote to Gould and took issue with Gould's use of a Marxist reading of the history of science and general tone: "Perhaps you consider it your function in a popular magazine to sound like a sophomore on a soapbox, but I cannot see that your tactic is doing reform, the public, or Marxism for that matter, any good."⁴¹

Second, Wilson had also participated in public press over sociobiology. In October of 1975 Wilson had authored a piece for the *New York Times* titled 'Human Decency is Animal' which declared the establishment of sociobiology as a new discipline and argued that the study of social behavior no longer belonged to psychology and ethology, but must be reassembled to put into compliance with current genetic understanding. Wilson wanted to make clear to the readers of the "New York Times" that biological research, when done properly' and free from ideological commitments, could pose no threat. He also wanted to argue that the opposing biological theory (behaviorism or environmentalism) could just as easily lead to authoritarianism. Wilson was quite aware that *Sociobiology* had political implications, even before the direct SSG criticism, enough so that he wrote and published a piece in the mainstream press. Why then did Wilson find Gould's article for *Natural History* so objectionable (considering that the readership of the *Times* certainly eclipsed that of *Natural History*)? Perhaps Wilson felt his article merely informed a public audience about sociobiology as a biological theory, without any political stance. Or perhaps Wilson was simply more wary of media coverage after several months of criticism from the SSG.

Gould's exchange with Wilson demonstrates that both the formation of scientific consensus as well as communicating that consensus to a public is a complicated, multi-directional process. It challenges the notion that consensus in this period was only formulated in peer-reviewed scientific journals and then filtered outward. Notably, neither Gould nor Wilson published in a discipline specific journal for this incident. Wilson's book was a synthesis, intended for a general audience of practicing natural scientists and students of science – which Gould responded to in a magazine rather than a book review in a scientific journal. Finally, the episode demonstrates that controversy puts pressure on latently accepted expressions of scientific authority. Gould's use of his column to promote his evolutionary perspective was questioned significantly more once he put himself into direct conflict with Wilson. Gould would continue to be accused that his flair for popularization allowed him to air controversial opinions to a non-scientific public, while other biologists were unable or unwilling to counter Gould in the same public venues.

Conclusion: Gould as a public scientist

Since the 1970s the sociobiology controversy has been approached from many angles. First in the press and subsequently by historians, it was alternatively cast as an interpersonal feud,⁴² a political struggle between liberal and conservative cultural perspectives, an instance of New Left activist overreach,⁴³ and even a conflict between naturalist and empiricist biological research programs.⁴⁴ Here I have hoped to show that the debate over sociobiology was an episode that highlights larger ongoing conversations in the later years of Cold War America over the efficacy and power of evolutionary knowledge and its proper communication to the American public. It came early in Gould's academic career, as he was determining whether and what type of scientific public intellectual he would become. Sociobiology was published only the year after Gould began writing for *Natural History*. Thus, it was while his identity as a popularist was in its infancy that he first negotiated the issue of how biological research should be conveyed to a non-academic public. Since much of the sociobiology controversy in the words of Gould's rested on a concern that biology would be taken up by a non-academic public, this episode is an ideal case to understand the role of public intellectualism in shaping the cultural place of evolutionary science in twentieth century American society.

The early 1970s was a new period for American politics and American science alike. The Cold War bubble government funding for large scale science and technology research was coming to a close, and would not reemerge until the Reagan administration in the 1980s. A growing counterculture, that questioned the importance of pragmatic

⁴⁰ Letter from E.O. Wilson to Stephen Jay Gould with attached letter to Alan Ternes 6 May 1976.

⁴¹ Letter from Neal C. Gillespie to Stephen Jay Gould June 28, 1976 in Stephen Jay Gould Papers, M1437. Box 230, Folder 6 Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

⁴² Myra McPherson Sociobiology: Scientists at Odds Washington Post November 21, 1976, p. 29.

⁴³ Nicholas Wade, Sociobiology: Troubled Birth for New Discipline, *Science* 191, no. 4232, New Series (March 19, 1976): 1151–1155.

⁴⁴ Ullica Christina Olofsdotter Segerstråle, *Defenders of the truth: the battle for science in the sociobiology debate and beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

uses for science and embraced Eastern philosophies and religion, complicated the relationship between Western science, technology and spiritual awareness. The rising fame and influence of public scientific intellectuals such as in the generation along with Gould reveals much about the role of scientific expertise in late twentieth century

American culture. Gould, Lewontin and Wilson all shared the presumption that evolutionary biology could positively shape American society, but they had dramatically different views as to how this was properly to be undertaken. This conflict formed the terms for the sociobiology controversy.