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## Scientific Atheism and its Deputies in 19th–21st Centuries: Religion's Substitutes, Irreligious Rights Movement and Anti-Creationism Non-Fiction

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This article questions the reemergence of scientific antireligious activist movements in the last centuries. Considering intellectual and political aspects of scientific materialism, Monist and New Atheism movements' programs as well as the historical context of their development a number of structural similarities is being drawn. Notably, the Darwinian theory of evolution in monistic dysteleological interpretation represents the main rhetoric weapon of atheistic science popularizers against opponents. Also, science is employed as a tool of 'freethought' communities' formation and campaigning for irreligious rights and against creationism's intellectual expansion. However, if earlier atheistic science popularizers were quite explicit on their world change ambition, contemporaries show no interest to author some new science-inspired worldview systems or political projects.

**Keywords:** Scientific materialism, Monism, New Atheism, Scientism, Freethought Movements, Darwinian Evolutionary Theory.

### Introduction

Intellectual and political program of the contemporary Anglo-American freethought scientists (R. Dawkins, D. Dennett, S. Harris) reproduces the key statements of German scientific materialists (L. Buchner, C. Vogt, J. Moleschott) [*Büchner*, 1900, S. 25], popular in the second half of the 19th century — first decade of the 20th century. So as the 'horsemen' of the New Atheism, trio of 'wandering preachers' plus E. Haeckel sought to change the general public's view on science, religion, and world around [*Beiser*, 2014, p. 146–147]. Their mission was to contribute rationalization and humanization of social rules and cultural traditions [*Gregory*, 2012, p. 189–213; *Holt*, 1990, pp. 40–41], and foremost to campaign for representation of irreligious people. Expanding claims of the Darwinian evolutionary theory and arguing its mechanisms to be almost universal, they consider science-based philosophical materialism to be not just professional way of thinking but truly scientific and rational worldview [*Kelly*, 2012, pp. 17–19]. Due to provocative expression in public their anticipation about traditional forms of belief replacement by

scientific atheism, activists-popularizers are being criticized for anti-religious ‘chauvinism’ [Büchner, 1900, S. 467–468]. Sources of atheistic ‘awakening’ in both cases were quite similar as we claim. Confrontation with two enemies, one represented by the state another by officials of Catholic Church (come out with ‘Syllabus Errorum’ in 1864) that struggled against intellectual and political dissent urged intellectual resistance formation in the first case. While the rise of religious fundamentalism in another inspired the typically progressists predictions of the religion(s) downfall as a sequence of science and general education development to be promoted with a new vigor [Cimino, Smith, 2011, p. 24–38]. In this paper we are to examine the sources and points of this structural similarity.

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Let us first concentrate on the context of movements emergence. In both cases there were the ‘party of tradition’ confronting with that of ‘progress’ as to say. Germany in the second half of XIX century faced the state’s “Kulturkampf” suppressed the labor, socialist, women movements and other forms of dissent. The United States and the United Kingdom from early 2000s see the rising tension between traditionalists and progressists in the domain of science and religion relations (“Cultural wars”). In western world, its battlefield is settled around debates on teaching creation and evolution in schools. Both epochs provide multiple examples of repetitive usage of the Darwinian evolution by trios of science activists for non-belief to rhetorically destroy opponents’ authority [Streltsov, 2017, p. 210–212]. Now we are going to look closer on their campaigns’ formation process.

**First stage** in the formation of the program we attribute to the “school” of “vulgar” (both, ‘public’ and ‘extreme’) **materialism**. ‘Wandering preachers’, as F. Engels characterized Buchner, Vogt and Moleschott, were public opinionmakers in the 1850–1870s [Glick, Shaffer, 2014, p. 216]. Further we will focus on Ludwig Buchner’s (1824–1899) figure as he was the most prolific writer of those three having published around 30 popular books, many of which were public lectures’ transcripts, personal letters’ copies and commemoration speeches’ texts. In fact, in 1850s he pioneered in his home country what we call ‘scientific journalism’ today [Büchner, 1900, S. 428–429]. Thanks to him, as to informal leader of burgeoning Darwinist popularizers, information on evolutionary theory was embraced in Germany more readily than in other countries, causing the most controversial public reactions on the continent.

Buchner’s opus magnum made him a reputation of the new scientific materialism’s ‘apostle’. He praised Lucretius, considered as the ‘father’ of philosophical materialism, and made corrections on writings P. Holbach who returned atheism to the mainstream of philosophy. Learning from both, Buchner himself gave a new voice to demand of the knowledge democratization, particularly, knowledge sourced from natural sciences; a call to write in a popular manner, become a parable since then [Büchner, 1876]. His later deprivation from academy was compensated by enormous amount of the ‘Bible of Materialism’ ‘s editions and unthinkable number of its translations (about 30 in 1898, acc. to the author: [Büchner, 1900, S. 410]) which he thoroughly updated till the end of days. Also, he became a comrade of Ernst Haeckel in most important public intellectual disputes in the German history of the 19th century. Their subject, to simplify, was an issue of compatibilism of science and non-scientific beliefs. The first one was on worldview meaning of the scientists’ methodological materialism, it broke out in 1850s (Materialismusstreit); the second, on Darwin’s theory, started in 1860s (Darwinismusstreit); the last one was on limits of scientific knowledge of 1870s (‘Ignoramus’) [Gregory, 2012, p. 55–58].

**Second stage** we associate with the “**natural**” **Monism** of E. Haeckel (1834–1919) that he developed in 1890’s and later. It was much more radical stance than that he shared with Buchner. Author’s version of Monism embraced the holistic understanding of science and diverged from methodological trends within sciences and functional division of disciplines in that time. From Buchner’s philosophy, his ‘teaching’ was distinguished by its ‘spiritual’ totality. Haeckel’s argument for boundaries between the forms of knowledge’ elimination was explained in course of his debate with Emil du Bois-Reymond we mentioned as ‘Ignoramus’-streit [ *Weir*, 2012, p. 5] . Author’s holistic project of Monism as a “bridge” between science and religion unified force and matter in one concept of substance, supposedly, intelligible by means of epistemological synthesis [ *Haeckel*, 1894] . To bring the change he founded the “Monists League” (1904), a quasi-religious community whose members, for example, practiced alternative masses with scientists at pulpit. Organization put together “free-thinking” scholars, religious dissenters, and politically “marginal” groups. Looking closer, we see that Haeckel’s “Spiritualization” of Nature was itself a part of tradition. Tradition of Spinoza and Goethe, popular in Germany since the Enlightenment [ *Gekkel*, 2008].

There is another reason to semi-artificially split Buchner-minded from Haeckelian-minded. However, there was a tight relationship between scientific and social thought in 19th century in the country, German socialists had an ambiguous relationship with Darwinism, and vice versa. Based on reception and interpretation of evolutionary theory and ‘laws’ of nature, they equally extensively used it as an argument in favor of ‘struggle for existence’ (Haeckel) either the necessity of social revolution (Marx, Engels and others) or gradual evolving relied on both economic competition and equal opportunities (Buchner, Lange, Bebel) [ *Weikart*, 1995]. Hence, there is a need to distinguish social Darwinists to whom we can arguably attribute Haeckel from socialist Darwinians to whom Buchner definitely adhered as he drawn nothing but socialist conclusions from evolutionary theory (that was not represented by Darwin’s work only but also of J-B. Lamarck). All three groups found the principal opponents in politically conservative German biologists led by Rudolf Virchow, who give support to Bismarck in the enactment of his anti-socialist laws of 1878.

**Third stage**, though chronologically and culturally distant from two previous ones, we associate with the rise of the **New Atheism** (from 1970s till today). Some authors have already noted that the New Atheists speak in debates from the perspective of the “old” “monistic atheism”, relying on the same polemical strategies and tools for preaching their views as the materialists [ *Shnayter, Kofler*, 2008, p. 61]. Those practices are focused on popularization of the natural science knowledge through public education (via literature, online media, open lectures and polemical speeches), organization of civic campaigns against religious elements in the social and political interaction’s space, primarily in school education and public law [ *Kettell*, 2013, p. 67].

Several authors whose principal area of research is literary studies call Buchner to be “Richard Dawkins of his day” [ *Boyle*, 2008, p. 93; *Hoevens*, 2008] and intellectual grandfather of the ‘horsemen’ [ *Berry*, 2018, p. 17]. However, the latter enjoy advantage over predecessors as not being subjects to expulsion from the academy [ *Bunge*, 2010, p. 108]. It can be critically noted that the New Atheists’ public message involves some ‘bad science’ of their own making that they exploit for science communication. For example, central dogma — nature over nurture or “Genome is destiny”, that is not all correct interpretation of genetics. In this paradigm (Dawkinsian, to be more precise) DNA molecule is presented as ‘selfish’ with a nonchanging intent to spread itself like a virus. Genes are also shown

as self-sufficient entities either self-duplicating. That seems to be misleading either naïve as thus the existence of organism (interconnected whole) itself turns out to be a paradox [Bunge, 2010, p. 109].

To make clear assumptions about the continuity of ideas, we turn our reader's attention to political program of the movements. 'Old' science atheists' forecasts were targeted overcoming the social atomization and political antagonisms by means of the public science education. In Buchner's perspective, the driving force of any society's evolution is the intellectual and moral development of individuals manifested in growing independence from nature interferences and primitive instincts [Büchner, 1889, S. 196–209, 337–343]. His 'evolutionary' vision of social planning involved investing in governmental social support and insurance, optimization of the living infrastructure, and, most importantly, ensuring universal access to humanity's cultural heritage through education [Büchner, 2008, S. 22–23.]. More radical was Haeckelian manifesto "The Riddle of the Universe" (1899). Its author sought to challenge the traditional social, political, and religious institutions [Haeckel, 1899]. He argued that the new world of the 20th century to be 'built' on morality of 'scientific religion'. In fact, on Monism's teaching, which program Haeckel proposed.

In this company, less pretentious seem to be the leaders of "Brights" movement. Again, self-authorized role of intellectual emancipators they exercise through popularization of science knowledge. Deputies of science atheism as well show themselves to be active participants in intellectual and political debates, especially, in course of "Darwin's Wars" rivalling against argument for coexistence of science and religious beliefs [Girts, 2013, p. 79–80; Büchner, 1900, S. 266]. As far as we can judge by their Policy Statement, "Brights" primarily campaign for recognition of non-religious worldviews; either, using lofty metaphors, for establishment of the "community of reason" [The Brights' Aims. *The Brights' Net*]. However, comparable to the Monists or scientific materialists, our contemporaries do not offer a new homogeneous Worldview, just using facts as a weapon to fight religion, not to create a substitute [Kaden, Schmidt-Lux, 2016, p. 17].

The goal of "Brights" is to "become visible," and make difference in the "flooded by faith" culture [Why Unify? *The Brights' Net*]. Contributing to science and naturalism promotion via freethought societies, they seek to unify and empower (as minorities) people of the non-conventional views for leading the public campaigns against religious elements in school curricula and legal systems and in support of the freethinkers' interests representation on political level [Frequently Asked Questions. *The Brights' Net*] To sum, the New Atheism stands in tradition of the earlier forms of scientism, that prove their references to science knowledge as source of moral, emotional and emancipating authority we will speak more on later.

Here, we will analyze the exact aspects of the movements' structural similarity. Both groups campaign for *science-based educational programs* and *non-religious people' rights*, using science popularization as the weapon against religion and the tool of forming civic communities [Smith, 2013, p. 80–99]. In such way Buchner's philosophical materialism (reinforced by socialistic ideals) made him one of the 'founding fathers' for modern Freethought movement in Germany [Weir, 2012, p. 2]. With W. Liebknecht he started the "German Freethinkers League" ("Deutsche Freidenkerbund") in 1881, where atheists gathered publicly for the first time. But Haeckel went even further by organizing the 'church' of monism [Kleeberg, 2007, p. 537–569]. But what sparked such search for identity?

According to Ann Harrington, "on the eve" of the 20th century there was an intense *demand for 'spirituality'* as compensative reaction to technologization of the social processes

and the world's "disenchantment" [Harrington, 1999, p. XVI–XVII]. Several natural scientists were reluctant to share materialism as philosophical point, followed from the evolutionary theory, as in Haeckel's interpretation, and empirical sciences methodology. Consequently, a group of scientists, represented, for example, by Jakob von Uexküll, sought to harmonize scientific research findings with traditional 'existential' requests such as the meaning of life. The reductionist "mechanics of materia's development" seemed inapplicable to purposeful life [Harrington, 1999, p. 12, 15]. Attempts to use mechanistic explanation of such mental phenomena as reason and consciousness caused no less anxiety than AI today. Its deputies, primarily Vogt, Moleschott and Buchner, by their radical statements provoked unprecedented fear and active discontent among traditional-minded people. But the great popularity outside academy to much extent cost them academic careers, unlike the New Atheists whose public career does not relieve from university's department. This notion highlights how much more tolerant and liberal academy became in 20th century.

Second half of the 19th century in Germany was marked by the upraise of "back to nature" movements, whose proponents expressed a kind of 'nostalgia' for some mythical true, opposite to artificial elements of life. The eventual coalition of naturalistic and political movements took place, to much extent, happened due to the 'dual citizenship' of such scientific activist as authorized considered. Experiencing opposition in academy to their reformist views, they 'went to the people', addressing in public speeches both scientific insights and political implications, concludes Lynn Nyhart [Nyhart, 2009, p. 4–5.]. To provide some examples, author recalls the events of 1880s. when an issue of biology discipline's place in the school curricula became particularly acute. Like a hundred years later, there was serious debate about teaching the Darwinian theory of evolution in Germany. Haeckel' project presented by 1877 proposed to replace religious education in Prussian elementary schools with his own teaching of evolutionary monism. This gesture caused nothing but a backlash: by collective efforts of the opposed organized conservative groups resulted in withdrawal of discipline from the curriculum in gymnasiums in 1882 [Nyhart, 2009, p. 25].

Scientific atheists basically tend to consider *religion as an obstacle* to scientific research as well as an individual's intellectual search [Büchner, 1900, p. 410–411]. Their claim of religion as a 'rudimentary' tool of world phenomena explanation is argued themselves to be the 'absolute' truth in light of scientific facts and theories of scientists' consensus. Being backed up by reference to the Darwin's theory, this conviction supposed to have no alternatives (such as non-overlapping magisteria), thus, contributing dogmatization of the worldview's incompatibilism. Expanding their thesis, authors defend some system's *dysteleology*, stating that world is eternal (as materia itself), unified (monism of materia) and cannot be explained in terms of purposeful design [Berhow, 2019]. The New Atheists accept such sequence as logical, as if it originated from the theory itself [Marinov, 2014, p. 829–854; Eppinga, Huizinga, Marcus, 2017]. However, we claim that the kind of dysteleology arises from scientific materialism or evolutionary monism' philosophy<sup>1</sup>.

Bucher described himself as a monist, probably, due to the influence of Haeckel [Gregory, 2012, p. 118–120]. Sharing philosophical worldview of his comrade, the same cannot be said on his view on ethics and his political orientation which we will discuss

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is often confused whether 'scientific materialism' is another name for 'evolutionary monism', Buchner in his writings puts clear that the term 'monism' is better to be used instead of 'materialism' due to traditional associations with the latter [Büchner, 1899, S. 214, 441–43]

later. In Buchner's understanding of monism principle sourced from the belief in: "unity of force and matter, which forms the basis of philosophical monism ... the fact that we must accept as it is and take it into consideration" (from the essay "Science and Metaphysics" of 1893) [Büchner, 1889, p. 210.]. He had conceptualized it in "Force and Matter" (1855) arguing thesis that movement and substance constitute a single entity, the basis of all natural phenomena — physical and 'spiritual' [Büchner, 1876] Multiple facts from contemporary sciences of that time shown him that traditional segregation to 'dead' substance and lively 'spirit' is misleading. That motion, as a source of what we call usually 'life', is inseparable from matter (attribute). Thus, concluded, sciences are to be interpreted to oppose any kind of philosophical or religious dualism. Consequently, the true philosophy of science may be justly called 'monism' (of nature or substance) [Büchner, 1889, p. 22].

Having published hugely successful popular summaries of contemporary science, Buchner with much success debunked the popular in Germany of his time idealist philosophy. For followers, he seemed to prove that matter is eternal, life develops from inorganic particles, and humans, thanks to evolutionary mechanism, are just more sophisticated animals. The scandalous takeaway of the piecemeal work was that any speculations on God and immortality were redundant as well as their theological and philosophical back-up. However, Buchner's later search for compromise between 'spirituality' and scientific facts made him more concerned about his readers' existential need for the 'ultimate' questions answers. He continued to write on more than just philosophy of science, but coherent monistic worldview.

Materialistic monists had no distinguish to mind and body, culture and nature etc. as the separate entities. They in fact developed their own version of 'spirituality' — secular and humanistic one [Hardie, 2004, p. 62]. However, atheistic 'spirituality' did not correspond the concept of 'soul' due to religious implications of the latter but was often associated with consciousness and its state. For example, to Haeckel the world was eternal, without a beginning or an end [Haeckel, 1899]. He not only sought to disprove religion, but also wanted to replace it with a 'religion of reason', Monism [Kaden, Schmidt-Lux, 2016, p. 10]. Similarly, Dawkins believes that studying of nature and science research is capable to arouse awe, which can be seen as analogous to religious experience. Thus, both authors hypothesize *science as a new tool of people's minds unification* [Kaden, Schmidt-Lux, 2016, p. 15] and promotion of 'the true, the good, and the beautiful' [Haeckel, 1899].

To generalize, materialism is the method developed for empirical research. Materialism as science philosophy maintains that existence is explainable in material terms, with no reference to spirit or consciousness. While monism is a worldview, with some 'spiritual' component, that defends unity of the material world. Also, it is a form of 'belief', alike belief in science also is. The theory of evolution, as we marked, is prolifically used by science atheists as an argumentative tool. In result, its users rhetorically make beliefs in materialism and evolution interdependent. However, if materialistic worldview is imbedded in Darwin's theory?

We see that famous in present and popular in past authors show almost rigoristic enthusiasm to Darwin's theory (and persona) defense. But what exactly meant to be the Englishman's teaching according to them? For example, Vogt tended, in his ordinary manner, to interpret Darwinism as a scientific proof that matter is all-encompassing independent and self-evolving entity [Amrein, Nickelsen, 2008, p. 262–263]. But neither he was the villain of the piece.

In Germany Buchner and Haeckel became two the most effective propagators of Darwin's theory. Brand new teaching traveled with them around Europe and beyond being

reinterpreted in years of its popularization to be a weapon of Creation's disapproval. It is claimed that Haeckel was the one who introduced still popularly used by 'horsemen' knot between evolution and atheism [Haight, 2004, p. 231, 235]. He was the one who invented mechanics of this argumentative fallacy and, consequently, is in charge for making Darwinism, as the New Atheists' opponents argue, an alternative religious cult [McGrath, 2013a, p. 7; McGrath, 2013b, p. 178–188]. We can justly suspect Haeckel in elaboration of the monistic 'ersatz' religion for that measures. However, today we see no alternative proposed by self-acclaimed "Brights". Hence, they seem to criticize with no trump card, as explicit program, in the sleeve.

To sum, Haeckel and such more moderate Darwin's preachers as Buchner were in fact the architectures of association between evolution and atheism that still prevails in public discussions [Richards, 2009, p. 147–154]. Ernst Haeckel is probably responsible more than any other biologist for false forced choice between scientific and religious beliefs [Vlaardingerbroek, 2019, p. 1–6], while Dawkins seem to paramount his predecessors with his rebuttals of any partnership between these two.

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To sum up, science plays a crucial role as an instrument of others conviction and the convictions source in German scientific materialists and the New Atheists' campaign. Science is understood to be a paramount knowledge and more general truths authority by the analyzed authors. Contemporary science atheism inherits many structural traits of its predecessors but seems to have less idealistic program and more mainstream as a movement.

Both 'old' and 'new' science atheism emerged in the context of 'traditionalist' party reaction. Thus, scientific knowledge, the main intellectual advantage over the opponents, is used by them as a weaponry against religious expansion in secular sphere and a tool for public' minds formation. Scientists mainly take two types of public roles that are interconnected. First, as educators concentrated on natural sciences and, particularly focused on the Darwinian evolutionary theory interpreted in Haeckelian way. Second, as freethought agents and irreligious people rights' activists who organize civil communities and speak on legislative initiatives. The main subject of their agenda, in present as in past, is to guardian school curricula from 'creationistic' invasions.

At the same time, the New Atheism has no ambition of religion scientific substitute formation while science materialism and Haeckelian Monists quite explicitly proposed a new 'natural' worldview. Also, there is no exact demarcation by political inclination criteria among the contemporary spokesmen that try to stay neutral in their political ideas' sympathies. When science materialists were quite outspoken and theorized based on science theories their own political program that might differentiate from socialistic to liberal.

However, an argument for considering science atheism as a recurrent social and intellectual movement of the post-Enlightenment world was laid much before us by theorists on 'Conflict thesis'. Our small contribution in understanding of the coexistence of scientific and religious knowledge debate reveals that incompatibilistic position of science atheists is probably determined by their civic ideals and their specific interpretation of the evolutionary theory. Moreover, the two groups considered share the 'classic' conviction that the path of progress lies through scientific knowledge popularization and its usage for world change.

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## **Научный атеизм и его посланники (XIX–XXI вв.): субституты религии, внерелигиозное правовое движение и антикреационистская научная литература**

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В статье ставится вопрос о возрождении научных антирелигиозных активистских движений в последние десятилетия. По рассмотрении интеллектуальных и политических аспектов естественнонаучного материализма, программ монистического движения и Нового Атеизма, а также исторического контекста их развития, выделяется ряд структурных сходств. Отмечается, что дарвиновская теория эволюции в монистической дистелеологической интерпретации представляет собой главное риторическое оружие популяризаторов атеистической науки в споре с оппонентами. Кроме того, наука используется ими как инструмент формирования сообществ «свободомыслия» и проведения кампаний за нерелигиозные права и против интеллектуальной экспансии креационизма. Однако, если ранние популяризаторы атеистической науки довольно четко заявляли о своих амбициях по изменению мира, то современники не проявляют интереса к созданию каких-либо новых, вдохновленных наукой систем мировоззрения или политических проектов.

**Ключевые слова:** естественнонаучный материализм, монизм, Новый Атеизм, сциентизм, движение свободомыслящих, дарвиновская теория эволюции.