

Is the Fascination With Dinosaurs a Manifestation of Colonialism?



by Theodore Dalrymple

There's a stage that all young boys go through—at least all the young boys known to me—that is so consistent that it seems almost biological in nature: namely that of a fascination with dinosaurs. Of course, it can't really be biological, because dinosaurs weren't named as such—"terrible lizards"—until 1841, by the comparative anatomist Richard Owen. The remains of giant reptiles had been found and recognized as such shortly before, but until Owen it wasn't realized that they were closely related.

Dinosaurs became really popular after giant models of them were put in the grounds of the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition in London of 1851. A century and a half isn't long

enough, of course, to have hard-wired fascination with dinosaurs into boys' brains. No doubt there's some other explanation.

An article in [Nature Ecology and Evolution](#) suggests an alternative explanation to the biological. I quote the summary of the paper:

“Sampling biases in the fossil record distort estimates of past biodiversity. However, these biases not only reflect the geological and spatial aspects of the fossil record, but also the historical and current collation of fossil data. We demonstrate how the legacy of colonialism and socioeconomic factors, such as wealth, education and political stability, impact the global distribution of fossil data over the past 30 years. We find that a global power imbalance persists in palaeontology, with researchers in high- or upper-middle-income countries holding a monopoly over palaeontological knowledge production by contributing to 97% of fossil data. As a result, some countries or regions tend to be better sampled than others, ultimately leading to heterogeneous spatial sampling across the globe. This illustrates how efforts to mitigate sampling biases to obtain a truly representative view of past biodiversity are not disconnected from the aim of diversifying and decolonizing our discipline.”

The moral shock and horror that this paper is intended to convey is surely ersatz or stupid, that is to say, either not genuine but merely a political ploy, or alternatively a refusal to admit the evident realities of the world. It won't be long, however, before boys will be discouraged from their dinosaur stage by fears that such a stage is the manifestation of a colonialist mindset. After all, dinosaurs were first recognized and studied in an imperialist country; therefore, the study of dinosaurs must be imperialist.

The number of paleontologists in the world is necessarily

small, even by comparison, say, with the number of professional athletes, themselves a very small proportion of any population. There are an [estimated](#) 10,000 professional paleontologists in the world, whereas there are [10,600](#) professional soccer players in Brazil alone.

Until the whole world has been examined equally for its fossil record, there will necessarily, and virtually by definition, be selection bias in that record. Not all the world can be explored equally for the most obvious reasons, any more than entire populations can be instantaneously lifted out of poverty to exactly the same extent.

To be surprised that [paleontology](#) is a study pursued mainly in rich countries indicates a complete absence of common sense. I mean paleontology no disrespect—I fail to see how anybody with leisure and opportunity could fail to be at least mildly interested in it—but paleontology, fascinating as it is, would hardly be the first priority for poor countries, even among the natural sciences.

Paleontology is an expensive and, in some sense, a luxurious pursuit. It's natural that it should be pursued predominantly by rich countries. Paleontologists have, I imagine, no particular thirst for martyrdom, and therefore it isn't surprising that they tend to shun countries difficult and dangerous to access, when there are plenty of other countries to explore. The people who wrote the paper should try being paleontologists in North Korea, for example.

The authors of the article deliver themselves of the following ex-cathedra statement, as an indubitable truth:

“The natural sciences were developed around an extractive process facilitated by European colonialism in the nineteenth century.”

Note that this claim isn't easy to refute because it has only an atmosphere of moral condemnation and no very precise

meaning. Its words are weaselly. Did colonialism cause science? Did science cause colonialism? Did they develop separately but in tandem? In any case, as a history of science, the assertion is very crude: Were Copernicus and Galileo not scientists, or William Harvey (who discovered the circulation of the blood), or Johannes Kepler (who described the laws of planetary motion)? The authors could reply that they meant only that natural science expanded in the 19th century, which is true, but in Germany the endeavor was completely unconnected with German colonialism, which developed only very late.

The underlying implication of the article is that science is tainted by its historical, economic, and sociological origins and that there's no such thing as disinterested inquiry into truth, that is to say, curiosity or love of truth about the world for its own sake, and that everything is, at base, political. The authors project their own obsessions onto the world.

Tradition is another factor that the authors discount. Where there's a tradition of science, it isn't surprising that scientific inquiry should continue, though this isn't an ineluctable law, nor does it mean that such a tradition can't be started elsewhere, precisely because science is the rational investigation of the world open to anyone. Japan, for example, which had no tradition of science in the Western sense, developed one very quickly—astonishingly quickly—after the arrival of Commodore Perry. Science is the archetypal activity that is open to everyone.

As science develops it grows more expensive to pursue. But the economic order of the world changes, and countries formerly poor can and do become rich. They will then be enabled to pursue paleontology—if they so wish. They will need to develop a tradition, but it can be done quickly with the right frame of mind.

Thus there can be no need to “decolonialize” or “diversify” paleontology, and the easiest, indeed only, way to ensure that its practitioners are representative of the population of the world as a whole is to abandon it altogether.

It seems that some kind of prion, the minute particle that caused the fatal brain disease known as kuru among the Fore people of New Guinea, has entered the minds of the intelligentsia in the West. In the meantime, boys should enjoy their dinosaur stage while they’re still allowed to do so.

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