



Istituto Veneto
di Scienze Lettere
ed Arti

Stephen J. Gould's Legacy: Nature, History, Society

Venice, May 10–12, 2012

Organized by Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti
in collaboration with Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

Ian Tattersall, American Museum of Natural History, New York

Steve Gould's intellectual legacy to anthropology

Abstract

It is rare for an invertebrate paleontologist and evolutionary theorist to make a significant impact in the rather insular field of biological anthropology. But in this case, as in so many others, Stephen Jay Gould was a shining exception to the rule. His contribution to anthropology was to a large degree an indirect one, accomplished through his contributions to evolutionary thought in general, and more specifically through his extraordinarily effective *Natural History* columns. But it was no less forceful for that. In a field in thrall to the "hardened" (his term) Evolutionary Synthesis, Steve's energetic promotion during the 1970s of the notion of punctuated equilibria opened up new perspectives leading to a more rational appraisal of the diversity evident in the human fossil record. And his tireless advocacy of the idea that human phylogeny presents us with a "bush" rather than with a "ladder" introduced into paleoanthropological thought a powerful and compelling metaphor that continues to gather momentum. His *Natural History* columns additionally covered anthropological subjects as diverse as bipedality as the fundamental human adaptation; the single African origin of *Homo sapiens*; the authorship of the Piltdown fossil hoax; the fate of the Neanderthals; the unity of mankind; and nature vs nurture and the relationship of race and IQ. In each of these areas, and many more, Steve's strong stances influenced the thought of professional anthropologists as well as of general readers. As a result, paleoanthropology today, and indeed anthropology in general, would be very different places without him. What's more, even a decade after his premature death, Steve continues to provoke controversy among biological anthropologists. In his book *The Mismeasure of Man*, Steve excoriated the early nineteenth century craniologist Samuel Morton as an example of science in the service of unconscious prejudice: something against which he warned scientists should always be on guard. Now Steve himself has been accused of something similar in his attack on Morton; and the ongoing furor should help keep the current generation of biological anthropologists on their intellectual toes.