

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

DEFENDERS OF THE TRUTH:

The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond.

By Ullica Segerstråle. Oxford Univ. Press. 493 pp. \$30

In his legendary *Sociobiology* (1975), Harvard University zoologist Edward O. Wilson set forth a comprehensive, theory-aware, phylogenetically ordered survey of social organization, from invertebrates to mammals. His final chapter, “Man: From Sociobiology to Sociology”—essentially an addendum, included for formal completeness—tentatively applied some of his conclusions to aspects of human behavior, including altruism, sex, the division of labor, tribalism, religion, and war.

Those concluding observations soon provoked a deluge. Critics charged Wilson and sociobiology with racism, sexism, and clandestine political aims. The first and bitterest attacks came, with great fanfare, from a local leftist band of (mainly) scientists, including some of Wilson’s Harvard colleagues. Calling themselves the Sociobiology Study Group, they had been preparing, without warning to Wilson, what amounted to a show trial. The brawl—*debate* is too refined a term—erupted and spread rapidly to the delighted media.

Segerstråle, a sociologist at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, depicts the fracas in absorbing detail and with exemplary fairness. She sees in it the roots of the current wars about the validity of scientific inquiry in general, and of the passionate disputes over evolutionary psychology (a term less inflammatory than *sociobiology*) in particular. In analyzing the motives of key participants, especially Wilson and his most articulate antagonist, Richard Lewontin, she shows how moral and political presuppositions can color the scientific convictions of even very good scientists. She makes this point honorably, without either what philosopher Susan Haack calls the “old deferentialism” toward science or, at the opposite extreme, the nihilistic reduction of science to a mere congeries of interests.

Segerstråle wishes to de-emphasize the

political sloganeering of Wilson’s detractors, their ideological posturing, their deplorable and false charges, and their Marxist logic chopping, all of which she documents. Instead, she focuses on what she sees as the dispute’s underlying cause: the collision of opposing epistemological-scientific worldviews. For Wilson (as for Thomas Jefferson), good inquiry follows truth wherever it may lead. His optimistic, Enlightenment-liberal social views encouraged him, originally in all innocence, to promote the uninhibited biological study of human behavior. Wilson’s detractors, though, saw science as necessarily embedded in existing sociopolitical arrangements. They reflexively opposed any biological analysis of behavior that might justify what they deemed an oppressive status quo.

Segerstråle maintains that, by illuminating these divergent ideas of what constitutes valid science, the sociobiology battle served a public purpose. Perhaps, but the silver lining is thinner than she thinks. However interesting to philosophers and social scientists, the fight did nothing to enhance public understanding of science. Quite the opposite. And, a quarter-century after *Sociobiology*, the dispute continues—less stogy, more epistemological (there is even a specialty journal called *Social Epistemology*), but still belligerent. It has consequences every day, indirectly in the legislative halls, directly in corridors of the academy far from the science departments. Segerstråle has given us an authoritative account of how it all began.

—PAUL R. GROSS

THE CENTURY OF THE GENE.

By Evelyn Fox Keller. Harvard Univ. Press. 186 pp. \$22.95

I considered turning in a book review that was only 85 percent complete. After all, that’s essentially what Francis Collins and J. Craig Venter did earlier this year when they declared that they had decoded the human genome. The announcement was a grand event, widely publicized and celebrated, even though the “book of life” is rife with typos and missing 15 percent of its text. Great sections of