

Abstract

(Philipp Sarasin)

Ernst Bölsche, Darwinist and man of letters, was Germany's most successful and influential popular science writer in the early twentieth century. As a student and friend of the evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel, as a free thinker, socialist, and reformer, Bölsche had considerable influence on that section of the reading public with an interest in natural science during the late German Empire and the Weimar Republic. In Germany he is credited with inventing the *Sachbuch* (non-fiction book), and Sigmund Freud himself praised his multi-volume *Liebesleben in der Natur*. Bölsche's works achieved large print-runs and had an enthusiastic readership.

All this makes it necessary to pose two types of questions. First, we must ask fundamental questions about popular science: what is it; how does it function; what status does it have among the modern scientific community etc. Secondly, and most importantly, what does it have to say? What does Bölsche say? What topics does he write about? What discourses does he take part in? What discourses does he himself push forward? What representations of nature, humankind, and society appear in his popular science texts? To what extent do these texts combine scientific thinking with political, social, and cultural ways of thinking? And to what extent do elements of scientific discourse mingle with those drawn from the field of everyday, 'ordinary' knowledge? Because popular science—like science itself—can never function in isolation from its social-cultural environment, Bölsche can, ultimately, also be read politically. How does a German biologist and Darwinist write at the time of the First World War, or after Hitler's seizure of power?