Eloge: Paul Lawrence Farber (1944–2021)

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Paul Lawrence Farber was born in New York City on 7 March 1944 and died because of pancreatic cancer at his home in Corvallis, Oregon on 28 November 2021, surrounded by his family. Paul was Distinguished Professor Emeritus of the History of Science at Oregon State University. He spent his entire career at OSU, arriving in 1970 as a newly minted PhD and retiring in 2008.

In the introduction to his first monograph, *The Emergence of Ornithology as a Scientific Discipline, 1760–1850* (1982), Paul wrote, “My mother has often maintained that I was born under a lucky star, and although my scientific education has made me skeptical of the existence of such a causal agent, my life experience has provided an abundance of empirical evidence for her claim.” While Paul’s life was not without its challenges, this statement encapsulates his fundamental optimism and self-confidence, which allowed him not only to flourish but also to help others around him flourish as well.

After his retirement, Paul did two oral history interviews with Chris Petersen of the OSU Archives, and much of my knowledge of his early life comes from these interviews as well as my conversations with him over the years. Paul, the younger of two sons, came from a solidly middle-class background; his father Charles was an accountant, and his mother, Helen Shapiro Farber, was a bookkeeper turned homemaker. His grandparents had immigrated from Latvia and the Ukraine, respectively, at the turn of the twentieth century, among the millions of Jews who fled Russian pogroms.

Paul lived in New York until the age of nine, when a promotion for his father led to a move to Uniontown, Pennsylvania, a small working-class town south of Pittsburgh. It was a culture shock: from a mostly Jewish neighborhood in New York to a town where Paul was one of two Jews in his school. He remembered wearing a white shirt and tie his first day of school and feeling like an alien amid the jeans and flannel shirts. Although he was dismissive of the schools in Uniontown, his passion for science was ignited during his time there. In high school, he and his friends built rockets and calculated their altitudes. Mildly dyslexic, he was, he recalled, not a great student but he was a great reader.

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Paul entered the University of Pittsburgh in 1961 as a pre-med zoology major. He also took a philosophy of science course with Adolf Grunbaum and history of science with Robert Colodny (who was rumored to be the best lecturer on campus). Colodny's course convinced Paul that the history of science was his passion. He worried that his parents would be disappointed, but they were very supportive.

At Pitt Paul met Vreneli Marti, who became his wife in 1966. By then Paul was in the graduate program in History and Philosophy of Science at Indiana. Vreneli had obtained a master's degree in Russian from Harvard and then followed Paul to IU, where she earned a PhD. At Indiana, Paul studied the history of biology with Fred Churchill—then a new assistant professor—and eighteenth-century science with Sam Westfall. IU was transformative in more ways than one: Sam Westfall's meticulous attention to writing made more than one green grad student into a historian, and Fred Churchill was a demanding but compassionate mentor. Paul elected to focus on Buffon, using Alfred Kinsey's copies of the first edition of *Histoire naturelle*, which were then in the open stacks at the IU Library. He completed his dissertation on "Buffon and the Concept of Species" in 1970. In that year he accepted a position in the General Science Department at Oregon State University, and he and Vreneli moved to Corvallis.

History of Science was then housed in General Science. Other historians of science included Brookes Spencer, Jim Morris, and Maggie Osler (who was Paul's close friend from grad school). There was a graduate program in history of science, but Paul's undergraduate teaching was mainly to science majors. He took it seriously, with a kind of evangelical fervor, not so much to make converts to history, but to broaden the horizons of the science and engineering students from small towns in Oregon. He long remained frustrated with what he believed was the curse of low expectations by the OSU administration.

Despite a heavy teaching load, Paul continued his research in eighteenth-century natural history, mainly in the summers, assisted by grants from NSF and NEH. He had decided he did not want to spend his career writing only about Buffon and looked instead toward the history of ornithology, inspired in part by the Tweeddale collection on ornithology at the Natural History Museum in London. (At one point, the curator got tired of fetching books from the collection for Paul and just handed him the keys to the locked cabinet.) One of the many fruits of that period was his important 1977 *Isis* article on the history of taxidermy, which remains a touchstone to the now flourishing subdiscipline of history of collections and collecting. His first book, *The Emergence of Ornithology as a Scientific Discipline*, appeared in 1982. Meanwhile he and Vreneli welcomed their twins Channah and Benjamin.

Despite his skepticism about administrators, Paul entered their ranks as chair of the General Science Department in 1985, the same year a Festschrift for Sam Westfall, co-edited with Maggie Osler, appeared. It turned out that Paul had a talent for administration; among his accomplishments as chair was establishing a program in Environmental Science that became one of OSU's most popular majors.

However, in the early 1990s, plummeting state funding for education in Oregon led to the elimination of the department of General Science. Paul moved to the History Department and shortly thereafter became its chair, a position he retained until his retirement. The relationship between History of Science and History had been

fraught, and his first years as chair were (in his words) “rocky.” But Paul recruited new faculty and managed to claim the new Horning Endowment for the History Department. The endowment supported the hiring of an endowed chair in the history of science, and Mary Jo and Bob Nye were hired as Horning chairs in 1994. For the next decade-plus, the three worked closely together on Horning projects, including speaker series, conferences, and graduate support.

Paul did not neglect his scholarship. In 1992, he co-authored a biology textbook with his former General Science colleague Michael Mix and Keith J. King. The following year OSU designated him Distinguished Professor. In 1994 appeared *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics*, which reviewed over a century of what he argued were misguided attempts to base ethics in evolutionary science. In this book he traveled far from the eighteenth century, but his next book returned him, at least in part, to Buffon and Linnaeus. *Finding Order in Nature* appeared in 2000 as the first in the Johns Hopkins Introductory Studies in the History of Science. Surveying 250 years in fewer than 150 pages, Paul argued for the continued importance of natural history amid the new world of molecular biology. Meanwhile, in 1997, Johns Hopkins issued a paperback edition of *The Emergence of Ornithology*, with a new preface and a new title, *Discovering Birds*.

Never one to avoid controversy—his work on evolutionary ethics elicited both praise and scorn—Paul next tackled theories of race. He co-edited a volume on *Race and Science* with Hamilton Cravens in 2009, followed two years later by another volume in the Hopkins series, *Mixing Races: From Scientific Racism to Modern Evolutionary Ideas*. This book mingled evolutionary theory, anthropology, and social and political history with his and Vreneli’s memories of being students at Pitt in the 1960s and interviews with mixed-race couples. In many ways it is his most personal work.

Paul remained active in retirement. He became editor of *JHB* in 2006, a position he held until 2012. From 2010 to 2012, he was president of the History of Science Society, which had honored him with its Joseph L. Hazen Prize in 2003. At the time of his death, he and Vreneli were collaborating on a biography of Theodosius Dobzhansky. He is survived by his beloved wife Vreneli, his children Channah and Benjamin, and four grandchildren.

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