

We are all pebbles dropped in the sea of history. On February 12, 1809, two boys were born within hours of each other on either side of the Atlantic. One of them, Charles Darwin, was born into an upper class Unitarian family with a long history of free-thinking and radical beliefs. The other, Abraham Lincoln, opened his eyes in a dirt-poor, backwoods log cabin.

The obvious truths of 1809 included the “fact” that life on earth had been created a few thousand years ago in a hierarchy, with lower animals, going up to slaves, then women, and above them, men, and finally to a god judging us from above, in a "heaven".

People also believed that societies without a similarly hierarchical social order were weak and unstable. "Democracy" was a fringe ideal of a handful of radicals, as radical as ending slavery. Although some people opposed slavery, others thought it benevolent, saving blacks with Christianity. No era is completely monolithic, but on the whole, any other ideas were "fancy," not fact.

By the time Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were dead, many people understood that the earth was very, very old, and that the animals and plants in it were all part of our one family tree of life. Most were convinced that democracy was a plausible way to organize a modern nation, and of course, legal slavery in the Western world was finished. (Although racism wasn't.)

Most of all, people realized that the hierarchies of nature, race and class that had governed the world were false. Lincoln and Darwin can be seen as symbols of the two pillars of the society we live in: one representing liberal democracy, the other the many sciences.

Even mountains are made of pebbles. Darwin and Lincoln remain high peaks of the mountains of our world. From the top of one you can see the other, and what you see is what we are today. Adapted from *Angels and Ages*, by Adam Gopnik