

“America Debates Darwin”

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Course Description:

When Charles Darwin unveiled his theory of organic evolution by natural selection in the *Origin of Species* (1859), Americans were on the verge of Civil War and not paying much attention to scientific publications. After the Civil War ended, however, Americans began discussing evolutionary theory in earnest and we are still debating it, nearly 150 years later. Today, evolution is a contentious issue from local school board elections, to national politics, to the Grand Canyon, where “Creationist” tours that explain the Canyon in terms of the Biblical Great Flood vie with traditional geological tours which claim the Canyon as proof that the earth is billions of years old.

While most scientists have accepted evolutionary theory since the 1870’s, polls indicate that the majority of Americans are not convinced. Clearly, evolutionary debates are not just about science. Evolution touches on key issues of American identity and culture, such as: the separation of church and state; religious freedom and diversity; federal vs. state control; public education; the extent to which we are a “Christian nation” and what exactly that means; the narrative of progress; and contested definitions of race, sexuality, and gender. More recently, skepticism of evolution has become a defining issue among political conservatives and religious evangelicals. Indeed, it is one of the key issues that divide so-called “Red States” from “Blue States.”

This interdisciplinary course will explore what is at stake in evolutionary debates from both historic and modern perspectives. Because evolutionary theory prompted widespread changes in so many areas of thought – from biology to sociology to psychology to feminism to literature-- this class will explore evolution through a variety of disciplines. The readings will be a balance of primary and secondary sources. Throughout the semester, we will consider the following themes: conflicts between science and religion; free speech; nature vs. nurture (especially in terms of debates about the biological basis of race and gender); and the growth of fundamentalism.

In addition to learning about evolution in America, students will hone their critical thinking and writing skills. Students will write a short primary source analysis, as well as rough and final drafts of a research paper. Each student will also be responsible for leading class discussion at least once. In terms of class format, I will generally lecture for a portion of the class, but most of the class will be spent discussing the readings. To enrich our discussions, I will often bring in music, TV or movie clips, cartoons, or other items that pertain to our reading.

Grading: 2-3 page primary source analysis (15%); 8-page research paper (40%); Final exam (25%); Class participation (10%); Homework and quizzes (10%)

Required Texts: Course Packet; *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1997) by Edward Larson; *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (1995) by Robert Wright; *Women and Economics* (1898) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; and *Ragged Dick* by Horatio Alger.

Films: “Darwin’s Nightmare”; “Inherit the Wind;” “Darwin Awards;” “When Husbands Deceive”; *Has Darwin the Monkey* (1922); *Southpark*, “go god go” episode (1997)

Topic one: What is all the fuss about? We will read excerpts from Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) as well as initial responses to evolution, including the religious and scientific arguments of Asa Gray, Lyman Abbott, and Louis Agassiz. We will also read Eric Anderson’s “Black Responses to Darwin and Evolutionary Theory, 1860-1890,” and Sally G. Kohlstedt and Mark Jorgensen’s “‘The Irrepressible Woman Question’: Women’s Responses to Evolutionary Ideology.”

Topic two: Social Darwinism. Even though Darwin did not endorse this term, many Gilded Age Americans claimed that the “survival of the fittest” justified gross economic disparities. Conversely, scholars and reformers

repudiated the deterministic message of social Darwinism and ultimately ended its reign. We will read excerpts from Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in America* (1955), Rosalind Rosenberg's *Beyond Separate Spheres: The Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (1982), and Carl Degler's *The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (1991), as well as Horatio Alger's novel *Ragged Dick* (1868).

Topic three: The Empire of the "Fittest." We will examine how evolutionary rhetoric was interpreted to support imperialist (and often racist) purposes. We will look at popular culture, including the circus, and read speeches by Teddy Roosevelt and Sen. Albert Beveridge, as well as excerpts from Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (1998) and Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the U.S., 1880-1917* (1995).

Topic four: Darwinian Narratives. We will discuss the ways in which American authors incorporated or protested evolutionary ideas through fiction. We will read excerpts from novels by Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, William Dean Howells, and Jack London, among others.

Topic five: New ideas on Sex and Gender. Darwin's theories of natural and sexual selection helped make sex scientific and changed popular ideas about gender. We will read excerpts from Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1905), W.I. Thomas's *Sex and Society: Studies in the Social Psychology of Sex* (1907), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898), and Gail Bederman's chapter on Gilman in *Manliness and Civilization*.

Topic six: Controlling Reproduction. Many people interpreted evolutionary theory to mean that humans should control reproduction through contraceptives and/or eugenics. We will discuss the ramifications of this for motherhood, race, and gender. Readings include excerpts from Wendy Kline's *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (2001), Margaret Sanger's *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922), and early birth control pamphlets. [KH: see Kevles on this – maybe also show film]

Topic seven: The Scopes Trial. We will examine the 1925 trial challenging the right of public schools to teach evolution. We will look at primary source documents, watch the movie "Inherit the Wind," and read Edward Larson's *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1997).

Topic eight: Evolutionary Psychology. Darwinian ideas of physical development inspired psychologists to explore to what extent our personalities are determined by evolution. We will read *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (1994) by Robert Wright, as well as articles by David Buss.

Topic nine: Evolutionary Biology. We will study the growing fields of evolutionary biology, primatology, and the even newer evolutionary developmental biology, focusing on their implications for the future of science, healthcare, feminism, politics, and religion. We will read the work by feminist scholars including Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and excerpts from Sean Carroll's *Endless Forms Most Beautiful: The New Science of Evo Devo and the Making of the Animal Kingdom* (2005).

Topic ten: Evolution and Public Education. We will explore modern challenges to evolutionary theory and its presence in schools, museums, and other educational facilities. We will pay particular attention to curriculum and textbook decisions by local and state school boards.

Topic eleven: Evolution in Popular Culture. In this final unit, we will explore the ways in which Darwin is discussed and debated in popular culture from the Hollywood film *The Darwin Awards* to popular advice books. We will also look at the contrasting narratives presented by museum exhibitions at the Museum of Natural History and at the Creation Museum in Kentucky, as well as the other places where Darwinian and creationist worldviews vie for adherents such as the tours at the Grand Canyon. We will look at websites, newspaper and magazine articles, creationist theme parks, and other sites of contention to help us make sense of recent events. We will also take a field trip to the Creation Museum.