

Creation, Evolution, and the New South

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It is striking how widely creationists have been condemned for their attempt to get public schools to teach biblical creationism alongside scientific evolutionary theory, and for their assertions that the teaching of “secular humanism” to their children conflicts with their religious freedom. From what I can see, an incredibly broad cultural spectrum, encompassing the entire center of national self-identity, has constructed creationists as a shared enemy, an “other” through which the American mainstream can identify itself as “not them.” From this vantage point, the creationist movement represents ignorance, intolerance, book-burning, religious fanaticism, and similar evils. Having thus conceived the movement, its opponents rest satisfied in their own identities as heroes, safeguarding the freedom to read and learn and believe from the suffocating narrowness of religious dogmatism. The supporters of evolutionary theory cast themselves as enlightened and vigilant protectors of the sharp line between church and state. I think that this picture of the controversy between evolutionary theory and creationism is wrong. For one thing, it is way too national. Seeing the issues through an ACLU prism, where what is at stake is “the separation of church and state,” sanitizes the conflict by representing it in the abstract terms of liberal political philosophy rather than as an actual lived struggle for meaning, power, and identity waged between particular people in particular communities and institutions. This nationalizing perspective treats the controversy from the outside, external to the local social relations that give it life, as if such controversy could arise anywhere, and, filtered through the grand concepts of church and state or religion and science, its meaning would be the same whatever its locale.

But these are not abstract positions that some abstract people somewhere happen to hold. The evolutionist/creationist debate is, first of all, uniquely regional, rooted in the particularities of the contemporary South and inscribed with the markings of southern history. And even this regional focus is too wide. The conflict is also, unmistakably, a class struggle between two distinct economic (and cultural) groups. On the one hand, the

college-educated, upper middle-class leaders of the new South tend to support the teaching of evolutionary doctrine because it seems to be the most rational, scientific way to explain the origin of human life. The creationist movement is embarrassing to this cultural mainstream because it reveals how “backward” the South still is, in contrast to their chamber of commerce boosterism which presents the South as nationalized, as just like the rest of the country, only warmer and more polite.

On the other hand, the creationist movement draws much of its support from working-class and poor southern whites for whom the transformation from the old South to the new South has meant the exchange of one set of rulers for another, the replacement of one discourse of power and justification with a newer, updated, more nationally acceptable version. For many southerners, creationism is part of a developing rhetoric of resistance against the reigning ideology of the new South, just as religious revivalism provided popular release from the public demands of deference and servility in the old South. The site of the rebellion is public education because schools are the institutions where the new South ideology has worked most dramatically to marginalize working-class southern whites under the guise of meritocracy and equal opportunity.

The struggle between these groups is waged in the rhetoric of evolution and creation, but the conflict is about much more than what is taught in biology classes. Rather, it is about the language through which the social world more generally is to be understood and justified, about why some kids go to fancy colleges and others go to vocational schools, about who gets heard and who gets ignored in PTA meetings and school board discussions, about who gets served and who does the serving in the fancy hotels of new South cities and towns. What is at stake here is not simply the interpretation of the origin of human life in the distant past; the struggle is also about the distribution and justification of social power in the living present.

In the old South, the wealthy, aristocratic southern “gentlemen” who exercised political, economic, and cultural authority did not justify their favored status through the scientific norms of impersonality, neutrality, and objectivity, but rather with a particular blend of

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patriotism, honor, religious devotion, virtue, historical destiny, and, of course, racism. The rigid social hierarchies of southern communities within which wealthy whites, middle-class and poor whites and Blacks were segregated according to specific and unalterable social roles were infused, in the ideology of the rulers, with a sense of naturalness and legitimacy, as something akin to a divine order. In the perverse merging of Christianity, racism, and classism, God was supposed to have made Blacks less than human, justifying their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy; working whites were superior to Blacks, but they lacked the "breeding" and "refinement" ever to hope to join the ruling class. Accordingly, the creationist account of the origins of life did not conflict with the rhetoric through which social status and worth was distributed. The commitment to religious narrative as a way to make sense of the origin of the world was shared by the rulers and ruled alike.

Now, this is not to say that everyone experienced religion the same way. For the wealthy, religious worship was a continual part of their more general culture. Church provided yet another realm of refinement, civility and honor. Just as they exercised secular authority with the resignation and benevolence of civic and historical calling, so they attended church with an attitude of compliance with religious duty. Their services were quiet and composed. Gentlemanly and ladylike appearances were publicly displayed. Ministers called for the sublimation of passion and the subordination to divine authority. But for both Blacks and working-class whites, though they attended different churches with different rhythms and different sermons, religious experience broke the continuity of daily life by providing a place to resist and reverse the social norms of the wealthy. In churches across the South, they developed their own cultural rhetoric, separate from and opposed to the reigning ideology that ruled everyday life. Here, in contrast to the public repression of passion that the ruling culture associated with refinement and civility, religious experience was infused with emotional release. The hold of reason and the seemingly endless destiny of daily life were rejected as superficial and temporary. Instead, church was experienced as a passionate spiritual transcendence, where rhythm counted more than words, where tent-revivals and holy-roller services became festivals of the spirit, where dancing and chanting and speaking in tongues were signs of salvation and redemption, where preachers sang and shouted and then sang some more, and where the dignity denied in daily life could be imagined before God.

To understand the significance of creationism today, it is necessary to comprehend this unique historical function of southern religion. The creationist movement

is continuous with the traditions of the southern working-class in looking to spiritual transcendence as a means to resist public ideology. While many liberals acknowledge and celebrate the role of Black churches in fighting the social structure of the old South, they often treat white, working-class religion with disdain. But despite the complicity of working-class whites in the public culture of racism, the fact is that they were also marginalized and excluded from significant social, political and economic power. At least in part, they shared with Blacks an experience of social life where they were subservient and where their subordination was justified by the superior rationality, refinement, and breeding claimed by the wealthy. Both Blacks and working-class whites rejected this ideology most openly and intensely in religious life. There the value system of day-to-day life was exactly reversed. And just as the civil rights movement reflected the church-based revolt of Blacks against the powerful in the old South, so the creationist movement today reflects the church-based revolt of working-class whites against the powerful in the new South.

While there are some, mostly rural, communities where the old-money, old-line southerners still reign, in most cities and towns they have been retired to their estates; their self-serving ideology of historical destiny, divine order, and paternalistic benevolence is no longer taken seriously. In terms of who is in authority, and what kind of ideology now defines the mainstream of day-to-day life, the old order has collapsed.

Instead, over the past two decades, the cultural, political, and economic center of the new South has moved from aristocratic families to the chambers of commerce. Today, the kind of dominant power that the old-line Southerners once possessed is exercised by a loose coalition of politically moderate, college-educated white southerners, a small group of middle-class Blacks, and a large contingent of corporate managers and executives who moved from the northeast into new southern suburbs when their employers, wooed by promises of warm weather and a loyal, grateful, non-union workforce, relocated their national headquarters to the Sun Belt. Along with this change in personnel has come a change in cultural style. The new South rhetoric is enlightened and progressive; integration is an assumed good, and racist appeals are taboo; education is valued and religiosity is viewed as primitive; the favored politicians are more like Jimmy Carter and Sam Nunn and less like John Stennis or Herman Talmadge. In contrast to the feel of authority in the old South, the new South power structure is on-the-go rather than leisurely, meeting in business lunches rather than through old-money families, attired in grey rather than white, and decidedly corporate, centralized, and managerial rather than personal, local, and communal. And, although the rhetoric of science

had nothing to do with the way that the powerful in the old South rationalized their position, it has everything to do with the way that authority is justified and institutional power is exercised in the new South. It is as if, along with the air-conditioning of the buildings, came an air-conditioning of consciousness. The new ideology of power is, like the scientific discourse of evolutionary theory, cool, dry, crisp, and professional. The edges of the world are not blurred with the haze of heat and humidity; they are sharp. Everything is explained analytically. There are no loose ends.

Evolutionary theory is preferred to creationism in this new South mindset not simply because the creationist account is religious and thus violates the legal separation of church and state, but more deeply because the evolutionary account embodies the same norms of objectivity and impersonality that are supposed to characterize the general exercise of public power by the new southern elites. In the new ruling ideology, the contrast between evolution and creationism represents the difference between objectivity and subjectivity, neutrality and bias, impersonality and will. Scientific representations, like the evolutionary account of life, are neutral and objective. They proceed on the basis of the passive, disinterested observation of external data. The scientist must be impersonal, lest his particular beliefs and values affect his clinical study of the data. And the data itself must be treated as objective. The scientist cannot ascribe subjective characteristics like will, intent, or motive to what he observes since such characteristics are unverifiable matters of conjecture and opinion rather than proof. Accordingly, the story of evolution, the account of life forms changing and adapting in functional response to external stimuli, disciplined by the reward and punishment economy of survival and extinction, is superior to the creationist version because it is value-free; it does not bear the subjective bias of interpretation.

Just as evolutionary theory is the prescribed discourse for biology teachers, the ideology of objectivity, neutrality, and impersonality constitutes a more general mainstream rhetoric within which community life itself is said to follow from the objective, neutral, impersonal workings of functional social interaction. The scientific discourse of evolutionary theory is mirrored first of all in the way that public power is represented. In contrast to the old South's projection of paternalistic benevolence, new South leaders present themselves as akin to scientists. They believe that the structure of community life is determined technocratically, by neutral, objective, disinterested authorities—urban planners, lawyers, financial experts, and other university-trained professionals—and thus social decision making is presented as the result

of expertise applied to objective conditions rather than the product of interest or will. Similarly, the scientific rationale provides the language of current social hierarchies to be represented. In contrast to the old South ideology of divine order, social status in the new South is said to be the result of individual merit and personal achievement. While affirmative action for Blacks might be required to remedy past injustice, in general the social divisions of the contemporary South are taken as the natural workings of the neutral, impersonal economic market, which is supposed to work much like natural selection does in evolutionary theory. The market establishes an economy of reward and punishment where individual initiative and educational merit lead to high status and indolence and ignorance result in low status. The distribution of power and prestige is not, in the official ideology, the result of the subjective, messy struggle of politics, nor the product of domination by a particular social group, but rather the objective, neutral functioning of a natural meritocracy.

Schools are a critical site for this new South ideology of meritocracy, especially because equality in educational opportunity is supposed to be the basis for a functional sorting according to skill and aptitude. It is therefore not surprising that the new South influence has been felt most strongly in the transformed language and tone of public education. Formerly, schools were experienced as something like an extension of maternal authority—teachers told stories about their lives, taught according to methods passed down from the older faculty, comforted worried students who looked to them for emotional support, led prayer before lunch, shouted at unruly classes, and disciplined with the physical contact of the paddle.

In the new South discourse, public education must be free from the possibility of subjective bias. Schools are to be operated apolitically for public good by unbiased specialists with doctoral degrees in educational administration. The relation of the school and the home is depicted with wall charts detailing the importance of parental “input.” Teachers are trained according to the latest field-tested methods of instruction; they follow a centrally prescribed curriculum. They are professionally certified and there is a constant call for objectively verifiable ways to measure their performance and effectiveness. And, just as the teachers and administrators play the scientist-like role of disinterested expert, the students themselves are represented in the official discourse as objectified data. Students are categorized from early grades according to verbal and computative development; they are grouped for greater teaching efficiency in separate learning tracks. They are tracked according to their performance on nationally

standardized tests, purified of local and cultural influence to satisfy the scientific norms of universality, impersonality, and neutrality. Their performances are then represented in the objectified form of a computer printout, complete with discrete, national percentile comparisons for each analytical category of cognitive development. The significantly lower scores received by lower-income students are presented, not as evidence of a problem with the tests, but rather as the result of "low socioeconomic status" or, in the bureaucratic acronym, "low S.E.S." Educational paths are determined in consultation with specialized guidance and career counselors who use performance on the tests and psychological profiles as objective evidence of "aptitude" and suitability for various occupations.

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Moreover, the new discourse of discipline is just as clinical. There is no more paddling by a teacher invoking the wishes of "your daddy and mamma." Instead, a student who misbehaves is said to have exhibited "inappropriate behavior," which then becomes the basis of a joint therapeutic effort between teacher, guidance counselor, and child. The student might be put on a behavior modification program manifested in a "contract" between the child and the teacher establishing a reward structure for "positive behavior" and a punishment structure for "negative behavior." A chart is maintained to record progress. Just as the various species are, within the evolutionary account, supposed to have adapted to the external, material environments, so the new educational rhetoric imagines the student as an adaptive entity whose behavior will be transformed according to changes in external stimuli of reward and punishment. And, just as the evolutionary theory is grounded in the clinical distance of the scientific method, so the general tone and feel of schools in the South today are characterized by an antiseptic, clinical distance between professionalized educators and objectified students.

The evolutionist account of the origin of human life is, in short, only one part of a broader web of discourse that constitutes the dominant ideology of power in the new South. For the new group in authority, what is at

stake is not simply the curriculum of biology classes, but in a symbolic sense the more general curriculum of everyday life; the same mode of interpretation that is supposed to distinguish evolution and creationism is also supposed to distinguish impersonal and functional social stratification from the class domination and racial bias of the old South.

But, however it is represented in the objectified discourse, from the viewpoint of working-class and poor people what has really changed is simply the composition and ideology of the ruling class. The basic social structure is still incredibly rigid. There is still an identifiable class in power. Today it is the upper-middle class rather than the plantation owners and somewhat integrated rather than lily-white. But Blacks by and large still hold the lowest paying, most subservient jobs. And working-class and poor whites, like most Blacks, are still excluded from any significant positions of power or influence in the community. The whites have become, in the eyes of the new South, merely unenlightened "rednecks" whose lack of college degrees justifies their subordinate status. And poor Blacks have become the unfortunate victims of a history that might correct itself in a generation or two. Of course, this point is never explicit. It is simply implicit in the ruling culture's arrogance that its own wealth and power have been earned and are deserved, and that its patronization of Blacks is enlightened and progressive. Today, the unalterable destiny of social class is communicated, not by invocation of divine order, but by computer printouts telling working-class parents their children are slow, by guidance counselors directing low-income students to training as plumbers, electricians, and service workers in vocational schools, by the continuing segregation of neighborhoods by wealth and race.

The creationism movement is one of the ways that working-class whites are resisting the new order. Just as religious experience opposed and reversed the dominant ideology of the old South, so religious discourse today provides the language to invert the reigning meaning system of the new South. And just as public schools are a critical site for the production and administration of social stratification under the guise of scientific rhetoric, so the strongest challenge to that ideology has been lodged in community struggles over education.

At one level, the creationist movement is merely about trying to lessen the alienating, colonized feel of public education by re-introducing local, home-based religious beliefs back into schools. But at a deeper level, the debate between evolutionary theory and creationism is the symbolic face of a broader conflict over the basic terms by which social life is understood.

The creationist discourse differs from the evolutionary approach precisely because it reverses the scientific representational norms of objectivity, impersonality, and neutrality. Creationism poses subjectivity, personality, and interest as the significant, and legitimate, mode for understanding the world. In terms of the issue of the origin of life, the creationist account of Genesis is a narrative; in contrast to the flat depiction of adaptation to an economy of extinction and survival, it inscribes the story with the will, intent, and motive of God, and the willful choices of man in relation to the personalized divine authority. Its version is historical and subjective rather than universal and objective; it treats the issue of origins by looking beyond the objective manifestation of life forms to the subjective motivation of cause.

Just as the creationist account sees the subjective, motivated hand of God in the story of Genesis, so it also constitutes an implicit rejection of the ruling ideology's depiction of current social life as the product of an impersonal, objective meritocracy. Instead, the narrative structure of creationism demands an accounting that looks beyond the objective manifestations of technocracy and science to the motive, interest, and will of those in authority. Just as it rejects the interpretation of life's origin as an impersonal adaptation to functional necessity, it also suggests that the segregation of children according to cognitive level as measured by standardized tests is not the disinterested application of educational science but a social practice inscribed with a particular history and serving particular interests. Creationism, in short, rejects the notion that the clinical distance of science is neutral and pure. It implicitly contends that behind the veneer of objectivity and impersonality are motives of particular people and groups, whose status and prestige are the result of historical power and will

rather than a timeless adaptation of merit and function.

When you look around southern communities today, it is striking how strictly class lines are drawn—by neighborhood, by school district, by tracks within schools, by restaurants and bars, by employment offices, by the cultural codes through which some are treated as important and others as ignorant. It is as if the measure of progress in racial integration has been bought at the price of heightened class domination. The creationist movement is one mode of popular rebellion against this current situation. It is one of the ways that the scientific, apolitical ideology of social life can be cracked to reveal the subjectivity and politics behind institutional practices, and one of the ways that the economically exploited can symbolically deny the reigning message that their social status is a result of their own inadequacy. Accordingly, I see creationism in large part as an authentic reaction against social hierarchy by those who are mistreated in the current order. Of course, it would be disingenuous to ignore the plain facts that the creationist movement also has repressive and authoritarian tendencies; its adherents are vulnerable to a new exploitation of their alienation and rage by the corporate ties, and big money-organizations of the religious Right. But it is wrong for progressives to conceive of creationists as the enemy, as simply a right-wing backlash to enlightened reform of schools in particular and the South generally. As a human response, such a reaction ignores the pain of subordination and humiliation that lies behind the creationist critique; as a political response, it forestalls the day, imagined by all southern populists, when the economically exploited, both white and Black, will overcome the divide-and-conquer tactics of the rulers and join together in remaking the social life of the South. □