

**Between Two Towers:  
Darwinism and Creationism—Complementary Ideologies of the  
American Empire**

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During the twentieth century, Western society was inspired by belief in material progress by means of science and technology. Material progress was thought to be inevitable, provided that a clean break be made with the past by giving privileged status to scientific knowledge while repudiating the authority of religion. In the last decades of the twentieth century, postmodernists began questioning these premises; but this critique has had little influence outside the academy, where appeals to science and progress still rationalize capitalism and dominate political discourse.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in the United States, there has been a resurgence of biblical creationism, with arguments not heard since the middle of the nineteenth century. The latter development is inexplicable

from the premises of modernism and scientific progress, but it can be explained by the anthropological theory of myth and ideology.

From an anthropological perspective, modernism is an *origin myth*—a story that narrates how things came to be, while implicitly justifying a particular system of statuses, roles, and political power. Although modernists believe that myths have been superseded by science, all societies have origin myths, even a society that judges origin myths (except its own) in the light of scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup> To modernists, an origin myth is false science, but to anthropology a myth expresses a system of belief that enables a particular type of society to exist and function. Thus, myths are to be judged by their social efficacy and not by their conformity to scientific standards of evidence. Indeed, to question an origin myth is tantamount to questioning the intellectual foundations of the society itself.

A good example of an origin myth is the story of Adam and Eve. Certainly, no scientist now believes that God molded Adam from clay and took Eve from Adam's rib, but this story still resonates in Euro-American culture, while the forbidden fruit has been made into an icon by the Apple Corporation. Nor is the story likely to disappear any time soon, for it explores the relationship between men and women, as well as the nature of guilt and blame. That is to say, mythic thought is largely refractory to natural science, and a myth will persist as long as it is needed by the social structure it exemplifies and the spiritual tradition of which it is a part.

A second feature of origin myths is that they interact with the system of power, either positively or negatively. That is, a myth can either support the status quo or be

used to challenge it. To many modernists and progressives, the Bible is an inherently reactionary text, justifying sexism, militarism, and all manner of social relations they abhor, but anthropology suggests otherwise. For example, in the nineteenth century, those people opposed to slavery, the Abolitionists, drew inspiration from the Bible, as did the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the latter was organized largely by Baptist ministers, such as Martin Luther King, who saw the story of the Jewish people's exodus from slavery in Egypt as a successful prototype for their own struggle against racial discrimination. Thus, origin myths can be used to critique the dominant culture as well as to justify it.

When myths are used to support the system of power or to justify some interest group within it, they function as *ideologies*.<sup>3</sup> As advertisers and propagandists have long known, ideologies are judged by their believability, not by their veracity. Yet the word *ideology* is not a synonym for falsehood, for fact is often more effective than fiction in furthering a particular interest.

As with origin myths, ideologies often begin with an account of events in the natural world, which is then applied to the social world, thus "naturalizing" the power relations in question. For example, in the Classical world of Greece and Rome, society was socially stratified, with a small caste of landowners at the top and a large slave population at the bottom. The intelligentsia saw nature itself as hierarchically organized, with male slave owners as exemplars of real human beings, while other forms of life, such as women and dogs, were ranked below them on a scale of perfection. This

hierarchy of nature, with *Homo sapiens* at the top and a succession of “inferior” species below, is known as the *scala naturae* or the “great chain of being.”<sup>4</sup>

When Christianity was incorporated into the Roman state as the official religion, it adopted the *scala naturae* but added the Christian Trinity to the top of the ladder, with choirs of angels interposed between God and man, in effect “naturalizing” a theocratic form of government, which came to characterize post-Roman Europe. In modern society, there are many opportunities for individuals to change their social status: by becoming professional athletes, by rising in a corporation, by running for public office, and so on. In medieval Europe, however, most positions in society were what social scientists call *ascribed* statuses, which are statuses that are beyond the power of an individual to change, such as noble/commoner, male/female, young/old, and so on.

Because the medieval system of power was so tightly integrated with the Christian church, political reformers in Europe felt compelled to reform the religion as well as the state (and vice versa). The Reformation developed *pari passu* with the rise of the merchant class, the age of exploration, and the growth of commerce.<sup>5</sup> In Great Britain, “non-conforming” Protestants (that is, those who were theologically opposed to the Church of England) challenged the spiritual authority of the established religion, while in Britain’s North American colonies, evangelical Protestants advocated the abolition of state churches entirely, seeing religion as individualistic communion with God that has no need of a king or a clerical hierarchy. When Britain’s North American colonies won the War of Independence, a prohibition against state religion was incorporated into the constitution of the United States, thus severing religious beliefs

from state ideology. In Europe, however, the French Revolution stigmatized religion as a reactionary force opposed to modernity and sought to replace it with rationalism and materialism inspired by science. This irreligious and pro-scientific stance became one of the founding premises of modernism.

European society, however, was still hierarchical and economically stratified, so the *scala naturae* did not disappear. Instead, it was laid on its side.<sup>6</sup> Where creation had once been a ladder of perfection reaching from the earth to the sky, now it developed over geological time from the lower to the higher and from the primitive to the advanced: the *scala naturae* became *progressive evolution*:

Savage → Barbarian → Egyptian → Graeco-Roman → Medieval → Modern

From this perspective, the past is necessarily primitive and the future advanced, while society moves forward on a scale of perfection. This theory had racial implications as well. Early evolutionists made no clear distinction between biological and social change, often explaining history in terms of “race.” Since non-European “races” were interpreted as stuck in the past, while the “White race” was believed to be on the cutting edge of science and technology, it is a short step to the conclusion that the White race is the most fit to rule. Thus, the theory of progressive evolution facilitated the colonization of the Third World by the European industrial powers. Where previous empires, such as the Spanish and the Portuguese, had been justified on the grounds of proselytizing the one true religion, modernist imperialism is rationalized in terms of White supremacy and economic progress.

With the French Revolution, evolution moved from history to natural history. Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus was a medical doctor and religious skeptic who wrote one of the first unequivocal expressions of organic evolution.<sup>7</sup> In a book called *Zoonomia*, first published in 1792, Erasmus Darwin theorized that life began as a microscopic filament of protoplasm in the ancient oceans and then evolved in a gradual manner into all the diverse forms of life. In his own words:

In some this filament in its advance to maturity has acquired hands and fingers, with a fine sense of touch, as in mankind. In others it has acquired claws or talons, as in tygers [sic] and eagles. In others, toes with an intervening web, or membrane, as in seals and geese. In others it has acquired cloven hoofs, as in cows and swine; and whole hoofs in others, as in the horse. While in the bird kind this original living filament has put forth wings instead of arms and legs, and feathers instead of hair. In some it has protruded horns on the forehead instead of teeth in the fore part of the upper jaw; in others tushes instead of horns; in others beaks instead of either. And all this exactly as is daily seen in the transmutations of the tadpole, which acquires legs and lungs, when he wants them; and loses his tail, when it is no longer of service to him.<sup>8</sup>

Around the same time, one of the world's first professional biologists, Jean Baptiste Lamarck, was reaching similar conclusions based on his own studies in comparative anatomy, microbiology, and the fossil record. He saw all life as a process of continuous change, hypothesizing that a species at one point in the fossil record

changed into morphologically distinct species later in time. He expressed these ideas as a scientific treatise on the progressive development of life on earth, published in Paris in 1809, the year that Charles Darwin was born.<sup>9</sup>

By establishing the reality of continuous change in nature, evolutionism made the idea of radical political and social change seem plausible as well, and it nurtured the transition from premodern to modern society. If “lower” orders can evolve into “higher” ones, then there are no “natural” aristocrats, only individuals who rise in the hierarchy by their own efforts. In anthropological terms, evolution is a repudiation of ascribed statuses, that is those statuses that individuals are powerless to change. As such, it is supportive of democracy and social change.

For this reason, during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the British government systematically suppressed evolutionism, even hiring propagandists to destroy the literary reputation of Erasmus Darwin, while less prominent evolutionists were tried for sedition.<sup>10</sup> As for Lamarck, he was dismissed as a French dilettante, unworthy of serious scientific study—an assessment that continued in the anglophone world almost to the present day.

By the time of the Battle of Waterloo, evolution had been denied admission to the curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge, but Lamarck’s book was still being circulated by the revolutionary underground, where it became required reading for socialists seeking to seize the state, abolish the church, and liquidate the capitalists.<sup>11</sup> Concurrently, the British bourgeoisie replaced the feudal aristocracy as the dominant propertied class;

and evolution began its climb to the pinnacle of power, culminating in the apotheosis of Charles Darwin.

Not surprisingly, the Darwin family was pro-capitalist.<sup>12</sup> Erasmus Darwin was physician to the first English industrialists and had successfully invested in their manufacturing firms. His grandson Charles grew up as a member of the propertied elite, attended Cambridge University, and as a young man was an intimate of the Malthusian circle in London, where his brother was having an affair with the most famous Malthusian propagandist of the day. Significantly, Malthus was far more than a demographer: he was primarily a political theorist whose work inspired the Victorian system of workhouses—the institution graphically portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* and condemned by Karl Marx himself.<sup>13</sup> Politically, the Darwin family supported Malthus's own party, the Whigs, which advocated natural selection in social affairs long before *On the Origin of Species* was written.

In premodern society, social class was expressed as an opposition between aristocrats and commoners, while aristocracy itself was defined in terms of noble bloodlines that were preserved through strategic marriages. In 1859, Charles Darwin promulgated a new theory of evolution that ingeniously reconciled the competing ideological demands of individualism, progressivism, and capitalism with the folk biology of superior blood.<sup>14</sup> Like Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin, he accepted the gradual development of life on earth from microscopic antecedents, but he rejected (at least initially) Lamarck's inheritance of acquired characteristics. Instead, he argued that some individuals leave more offspring than their competitors, thus ensuring the propagation of

some inherited traits at the expense of others—a theory that naturalizes competition as the source of evolutionary change. In short, Darwin replaced an aristocracy of inherited bloodlines with a meritocracy of evolving bloodlines, thereby rationalizing a ruling class forged in the crucible of unrestricted competition. Not long after, in a bloodless coup, Darwinism took over the Anglo-American universities, replacing a pseudo-Christian *scala naturae* with a progressive, materialist one of its own.<sup>15</sup>

Fish → Amphibians → Reptiles → Mammals → Apes → Blacks → Whites

Consistent with his evolutionism, Charles Darwin was personally opposed to slavery (an ascribed status); and he asserted that all human beings are descended from a common ancestor (as in the Bible). But in his treatment of human evolution, he uncritically accepted the *scala naturae* and the supremacy of the White race, a position conveyed by the subtitle of his most famous work, namely, *On the origin of species by means of natural selection or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. As Darwin himself realized, natural selection does not guarantee progress, for the “most fit” are simply those who reproduce better than their competitors. Yet he believed in progress as much as any other English gentleman of his time, even voicing concern in *The Descent of Man* that the purportedly shiftless Irish were reproducing faster than thrifty, hard-working Scots.<sup>16</sup> After raising the problem of too many people of the wrong kind, Darwin implicitly endorses a solution by introducing his readers to the work of his cousin, Francis Galton, the founder of the eugenics movement. Eugenicists propose to better maintain the breed stock of the human species by introducing selective breeding and sterilizing the putatively unfit.<sup>17</sup> Far from being socially marginal, eugenics was

endorsed by prominent Darwinian scientists; and it became mainstream biology by the early twentieth century, inspiring legislation in nearly all industrial countries, especially the United States and Germany.<sup>18</sup> By merging natural selection with artificial selection, Darwinism created a modernist analog of aristocratic bloodlines.

Darwin's theory of natural selection also fit perfectly with the era of corporate capitalism then emerging in the United States and northern Europe. Traditionally, capitalism was implemented by family firms or by state monopolies, such as the East India Company; but in the late nineteenth century, the corporation became a fictive individual with all the rights of a person yet with none of the latter's responsibilities, one whose only goal was unrestricted competition in the service of profit. By making natural selection the mechanism of evolutionary change, Darwin "naturalized" competition and made the corporation consistent with life itself. In 2009, Darwin's 150th birthday was celebrated worldwide and trumpeted by the Anglo-American media, which is a measure of his ideological centrality.

Yet in the United States at the present time Darwinism is under attack by the conservative, evangelical Christian groups that dominate the Republican Party. This in itself requires explanation, for Darwinism is in many respects congenial to conservative politics. After all, it was Darwinism that bolstered German militarism, White racism, and Yankee capitalism in its guises of group selection, eugenics, and Social Darwinism respectively.<sup>19</sup> In common with these imperialist creeds, the religious right in the United States is pro-capitalist, nationalistic, and militarist. So why doesn't it like Darwin?

The answer is that Darwinism is no longer supportive of sexism, racism, and social hierarchy. For much of the twentieth century, educated Americans, even in the North, were overtly racist; and such beliefs were validated by a putatively biological hierarchy of races, which in turn was grounded in evolutionary biology. After World War II, however, no one wanted to be associated with Nazis, not even genetic determinists; and charts showing the primitiveness of the Black race were quietly dropped from the biological curriculum. Also, American science was enlisted into the titanic struggle between capitalism and communism, and evolutionary biology “proved” that competition and freedom are “natural,” while all races are created equal. Thus, by shedding the *scala naturae* and reverting to its progressive roots, postwar American Darwinism ended up on the side of racial integrationists and political progressives.

Upward mobility and equal opportunity for all is the official ideology of the United States, and it remains a belief inspiring to many. However, it is an imperfect description of social reality, for there have always been some groups to which the official ideology does not apply. Among these, the first and foremost are people of African descent, who when not outright slaves, were prevented from advancing; and when they should happen to do so, they were discriminated against in other ways. In the Old South, Black people were by definition slaves unless they bought their freedom, and after the Civil War, they were kept subordinate by acts of terrorism and laws that supported racial discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Even in the North, where Blacks were nominally free, the informal practice of discrimination in jobs and housing achieved many of the same results as did Jim Crow laws in the South.

In an aristocratic society, heredity determines one's social status, as with the strategic marriages and noble bloodlines of Europe; but in the late eighteenth century the new United States of America repudiated aristocracy, to the point that its constitution forbade titles of nobility. However, the United States did not repudiate "blood" as a mark of social status. In the Old South, the law specified that one was a slave if one had "one drop" of Black blood in one's veins, though in practical terms blood was determined by skin color, not by blood tests and genetics, as these had not been invented yet.

Even though slavery was made illegal in United States in the 1860s, the folk theory of superior and inferior "blood" did not disappear. Rather, the folk concept of blood has been reinterpreted in terms of genetic science, though acquiring little actual science in the process. It is this identification of "blood" with social status that explains the rejection of evolution by White supremacists. In the Old South slaves were captured in Africa like apes, yet Darwin says that humans are descended from apes. But if this be so, then Whites must have Black blood in their veins—a thought impossible for racists to contemplate. It is easier to believe that evolution must be wrong!

A century after the Civil War, race relations in the United States underwent another major change, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial discrimination in education, housing, and the workplace. Even racist statements became taboo, to the point that television and radio hosts are now fired for uttering racist slurs.<sup>21</sup> But racism did not disappear. After the Civil Rights Act was passed, many racists founded private schools that could perpetuate separatism outside the public schools; and many of these were ostensibly religious, teaching the Southern brand of Christianity known as

fundamentalism. In effect, racism disguised itself as religion, thereby acquiring the right of free speech and avoiding the legal snares of the Civil Rights Act.

In the Southern United States, race and religion have long been linked. In the Old South, slavery was justified by an obscure text from the book of Genesis.<sup>22</sup> Blacks were said to be descended from Noah's grandson Canaan, for it is written: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (Genesis 9:25). Also, Christianity in the South was racially segregated into White and Black churches; and before the Civil War, two of the major Protestant denominations in the United States split into northern and southern branches due to the controversy over slavery, giving Southern religion an insularity that continues to this day. After the Civil War, Southern culture was marginalized, along with its fundamentalist Christianity, while in other parts of the country intellectual life came to be synonymous with modernism. By the mid-twentieth century, religion had retreated from the political arena under the impetus of secularization, while evolution was generally accepted as a scientific fact.

However, in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act, courts enforced racial integration by ordering Black children to be bussed to all-White schools, which led to popular protests by Whites even in the North. President Nixon, a Republican, took advantage of this situation, using discontent with racial reform in order to revitalize a conservative political agenda to keep political power firmly in the hands of White, male property owners. He called his program the *Southern strategy*.<sup>23</sup>

The Republican Party's covert appeal to sexism and White supremacy also entailed a tacit acceptance of Southern Christianity, since much of American racism is

now articulated as a repudiation of evolutionism, itself justified by a reaffirmation of the literal truth of the creation stories in Genesis. Beginning in 1977, a number of well-financed, conservative Christian organizations emerged in the United States with a well-defined political agenda, such as Jerry Falwell's Christian Coalition, which had strong support in the South. These groups are either skeptical of evolution or opposed to it publicly. In 1979, Ronald Reagan, in his campaign for the presidency, successfully courted evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, bringing them into the political mainstream as Republican voters—where they now constitute a significant power bloc known as the *religious right*.<sup>24</sup>

Theologically, the religious right is a smorgasbord of diverse traditions, including biblical literalists who read the Bible as history, creationists who try to make science consistent with Genesis, self-styled prophets who match biblical texts to current events, and would-be theocrats who are trying to recreate a Calvinist republic modeled on sixteenth-century Geneva. They are united, however, against modernism and secularization—which puts Darwin squarely in their crosshairs. This resurgence of creationism is incomprehensible to scientists and progressives, who expected religion to wither away—but as I have attempted to show here, it is explicable by the anthropological theory of myth and ideology.

However spurious the debate on evolution may be in terms of science and theology, it has been very effective politically. Figure 1 (left side) shows the results for the 2004 election, in which George W. Bush was re-elected by a significant plurality of the states (though with a very thin margin in total votes cast).<sup>25</sup> The anti-Bush states,



a stick (or in Spanish, silver [money] or lead [bullets])—represented in the Great Seal of the United States as the olive branch and the bundle of arrows grasped by the American eagle. This opposition is mirrored in the contrast between evolutionism and the religious right. Evolutionism implicitly supports individualism, upward mobility, scientific rationalism, and material progress (the carrot or silver), while the religious right provides the United States with its ethos of punitive self-righteousness, as well as its militarism, Zionism, and covert racism (the stick or lead bullets).

For the empire to work effectively, the two talons of the American eagle must be in balance; but over the past three decades there has been an increasing shift to the right politically, reflected by such changes as punitive laws, increased surveillance, and privatization of public wealth. Economically, there is also increasing disparity of wealth between the top and bottom of American society, as well as the erosion of the middle class.<sup>27</sup> On an ideological level, these changes are heralded by the penetration of creationism into the political mainstream. That is, as the economy evolves into ever-greater consolidation of wealth, any ideology of social class must restrict upward mobility to a few while justifying the social exclusion of the many—a goal traditionally achieved with ascribed social statuses. As in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the propertied class is once again better served by autocratic religion than by an evolutionist ideology of progress and upward mobility.<sup>28</sup>

When capitalism disguised as natural selection collides with racism disguised as Christianity, Americans call it a conflict between science and religion. Yet when viewed from a larger perspective, specifically, from the vantage point of the class system and

the American empire, these contradictory belief systems can be seen as mutually supportive. Fundamentalist religion provides social ascription to solidify the bottom of the pyramid while evolutionism promises upward mobility to those few who still strive to reach the top. Thus, the penetration of creationism into the political mainstream in the United States today is best understood as an ideological index of structural change in the political economy. That is, creationism signals a change from a social system that promises personal freedom and economic opportunity to all to one that rationalizes a bifurcation of society into hereditary classes of “haves and have-nots.”

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Aylesworth (2005)
  - <sup>2</sup> Reynolds (1991)
  - <sup>3</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1966)
  - <sup>4</sup> Lovejoy (1936)
  - <sup>5</sup> Weber (1958)
  - <sup>6</sup> Reynolds (1981)
  - <sup>7</sup> King-Hele (1977, 1999)
  - <sup>8</sup> E. Darwin (1803)
  - <sup>8</sup> Corsi (1988), Lamarck (1984)
  - <sup>10</sup> King-Hele (2003)
  - <sup>11</sup> Desmond (1989)
  - <sup>12</sup> Desmond and Moore (1994)
  - <sup>13</sup> Marx, Engels, and Meek (1954)
  - <sup>14</sup> C. Darwin (1859)
  - <sup>15</sup> Desmond (1997), Marsden (1994)
  - <sup>16</sup> Darwin (1871)
  - <sup>17</sup> Darwin (1871)
  - <sup>18</sup> Black (2003), Kevles (1986), Paul (1995), Weikart (2004)
  - <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*
  - <sup>20</sup> Davis (2006)
  - <sup>21</sup> Wittenauer (2006)
  - <sup>22</sup> Heyrman (1997), Peterson (1978)
  - <sup>23</sup> Reeves (2001)
  - <sup>24</sup> Phillips (2006)
  - <sup>25</sup> Sources for slavery map: Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries, creator Peter Siczewicz. Sources for Election map: Michael Gastner, Cosma Shalizi, and Mark Newman, University of Michigan.
  - <sup>26</sup> Weiner (2007)
  - <sup>27</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2008).
  - <sup>28</sup> Rifkin and Howard (1979)

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Peter C. Reynolds holds a doctorate in anthropology from Yale University, with an emphasis on the behavioral biology of primates. His first book, *On the Evolution of Human Behavior*, was published by the University of California Press. In addition, he was postdoctoral fellow in neuropsychology at Stanford University, where he did research in cognitive psychology. In *Stealing Fire: The Atomic Bomb as Symbolic Body*, he explores the origin myths that underlie modern high technology. Most recently, he has been developing an anthropologically-informed alternative to the Darwinian theory of human origins.