ABSTRACT

EVOLUTION AND RACE
IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA
by Sarah Brady Siff

Evolutionary theory in the United States has always been tied to the question of physical differences between groups of humans. During the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, some argued that black people were less evolved than white people, as opposed to others who insisted that evolutionary theory proved all mankind arose from a single ancestor. Some segregationists compared black people to apes and monkeys to indicate lower evolutionary status, and others used the term “evolution not revolution” as an argument against significant changes in blacks’ status. In these ways, evolutionary theory was tainted by the acrimony of civil rights debates. This entanglement could be a factor contributing to the theory’s non-acceptance by a significant segment of Americans.
E V O L U T I O N  A N D  R A C E
I N M I D - T W E N T I E T H C E N T U R Y  A M E R I C A

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3. Cartoon by L. Rogers for the *Chicago Defender*, page 11.
Dedication

To my husband, Steve
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Introduction

In 1962, newly elected Alabama governor George C. Wallace held a press conference to announce the results of a state-sponsored study claiming to prove that black people were 200,000 years less evolved than whites. The study’s primary investigator, a University of North Carolina biologist, said the differences were proven by intelligence testing and accounted for by differences in brain structure. A 1964 *Time-Life* book on evolution featured a full-color spread of head shots representing the various “races of man.” Formatted like a junior-high textbook, it explained the history and mechanics of evolution and heredity, presenting human groups such as “negroid” and “Javanese” as outcomes of the evolutionary process. In 1965, Los Angeles police chief William Henry Parker compared black rioters in Watts to “monkeys in a zoo.” Three months after the riot, as hopes for improvements and jobs dwindled in Watts, discouraged black people there could recite Parker word for word.1

In these ways and many others, evolutionary theory—the idea that species originate from other species through genetic mutation and environmental pressure over very long periods of time—played a part in public discourse as the civil rights movement unfolded. Intellectuals, civil rights leaders, segregationists, scientists, and journalists reflected on the relationship of evolution to “race,” interpreting evolutionary theory and invoking evolutionary metaphors to support their political aims. The underlying appeal of every argument was the authority of scientific evidence, but scientific knowledge is by nature contingent and subject to challenge. Like “science” itself, “evolution” suffered a profound multiplicity of definition and use.

Today we need to better understand the formation and political use of these evolutionary ideas. A sizable anti-evolution contingent works hard to cast doubt on evolutionary theory’s validity, but biologists and others find it an indispensable framework for the development of medical and agricultural innovations, among other scientific endeavors. Many parents do not approve of their children learning about evolution in school, and can choose religious schools or home-schooling without articulating, or perhaps without knowing, what drives their opposition to this area of science. Such opposition often stems from religious motives, but could also be related to civil-rights-era debates over the nature of human difference, which leaned heavily on evolutionary theory to support both racist and egalitarian stances. Given that connection, it is useful to describe the relationship between evolution and race during the civil rights movement, which coincided with a successful nationwide push for re-introduction of evolutionary theory into high school biology textbooks in the 1960s. Evolution had been largely purged from

textbooks following the successful prosecution of John Scopes in 1925 for teaching it to high school students.

A starting point is necessarily a history of the interaction of racial and evolutionary thought in America before 1950. Evolutionary theory has always been tightly tied to questions about human difference, and ideas about race in America took shape alongside the development of evolutionary theory. From its beginnings, leaders in the new republic expected biological knowledge to illuminate the contentious issue of human difference. This first appeared as an appeal to the classification systems of natural scientists, but when evolution emerged as biology’s paramount theory, the question of racial difference shifted to this fertile new ground. A powerful explanatory framework in biology, evolutionary theory tended to reinforce the existing power structures when applied to society. Many Americans embraced Social Darwinism, applying the notion of survival of the fittest to civil society, as a way to explain ugly racial and class inequities during the Gilded Age. Biological evolution lent the weight of its authority to hierarchical and progressionist models of human evolution in the emerging social sciences. Anthropologists staked out a sizable claim to the race issue and developed their own special relationship with evolution. Into the twentieth century, national debates over eugenics and immigration restriction, and events such as the Scopes trial bound evolution and race together in many forums. But as genetics bolstered Darwinian evolutionary theory and a scientific consensus on evolution’s tenets emerged through the late 1930s, some biologists began to formulate refutations of the very concept of race.

This debate continued into the 1950s and 1960s. The idea that black people were less evolved than whites cropped up repeatedly in the discourse of the civil rights era. Through the 1960s, Ku Klux Klansmen decried the “black ape race,” and black women testified that bus drivers in Montgomery, Alabama had called them “ugly black apes.” Increasingly, newspapers carried accounts of anti-integration protests which included such name-calling from whites not affiliated with the Klan, and not limited to Southern backwaters. The placement of black people into categories of other species denied the most current scientific knowledge and placed whites relatively higher on the evolutionary chain.

But some physical anthropologists supported the view of differential evolution. Carleton S. Coon’s landmark 1962 work *The Origin of Races* concluded that black people were 200,000 years less evolved than whites. Because of the depth and rigor of its research, the book gained some positive reviews from fellow scientists who also noted that its social implications were troubling. Others refuted its scientific merit, and a vigorous debate ensued in scientific journals. Ignoring this debate, segregationists building “scientific” arguments against integration seized on Coon’s findings, distributing them widely in pamphlets and books.

Meanwhile, black Americans were advised that their rights should be acquired by “evolution not revolution,” a phrase frequently employed in arguments over how swiftly integration should be enforced. The term became a slogan, used by
Arkansas leaders during the integration crisis in Little Rock, following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling desegregating schools, and even finding its way into the national debate over adoption of a civil rights act. Much like Herbert Spencer's social Darwinist idea of “survival of the fittest” a century earlier, “evolution not revolution” posited that interference with the status quo would be both unnatural and disastrous.

The question of differences between groups of people far preceded evolutionary theory. But with its eventual acceptance as the main framework for biology, evolution became the grounds on which “race” differences were frequently discussed, even into recent history. Many of these discussions reflected outmoded or inaccurate interpretations of evolutionary theory, and some were shot through with outright racism. But all weighed upon public opinion regarding evolution. The linkage between evolutionary theory and race that extended through the civil rights movement helped cement a polarization of views on evolutionary theory in the United States. This is why a study of the conflation of race and evolution during this time period is particularly pressing. The high-running emotions and enmity of race issues spilled over onto what should have been a reasoned debate on the scientific merit of a theory about how species originate and made it into something far more abrasive in ways that continue to resonate today.
Chapter 1: A Brief History of Race and Evolution to 1950

Are some groups of humans naturally superior to others? This question preoccupied Europeans as they spread across the globe during the Age of Enlightenment. They sought the answer in biology (although the study of living things had not yet been given that name). Biology at the time was based on natural historians’ systems of classification. When evolutionary theory displaced classification as the primary framework of biological explanation, the “race question” went along with it. Because of its implications for the Christian doctrine of creation by an all-powerful God, evolutionary theory would have been contested even without this nagging race issue. A major point of contention—whether races had formed separately or arisen from a single ancestor—dominated debates over whether evolutionary theory supported a hierarchy of races. Many anthropologists adopted the belief that some “primitive” groups had stopped evolving at an earlier stage while others continued to progress.

In major events in United States history, the connection between debates over race and evolutionary theory emerges again and again, reflecting a uniquely American set of problems. These events include the Civil War, the Scopes trial, the nativist movement, and the eugenics movement. By 1950, scientists consensually refuted many of the old notions about racial hierarchies, but these views remained among many Americans, especially in the South.

Natural Historians and the Race Question

Thomas Jefferson dabbled in biology. Believing agriculture to be the finest occupation for man, he avidly collected seeds and selectively bred both edible and inedible plants. He also collected animal fossils, engaging in a dispute—which he ultimately won—with preeminent French naturalist Georges-Louis le Clerc, Comte de Buffon, over the identification of mastodon bones found in North America. Buffon was perhaps blinded by his own grand theory that species in the Old World were inherently superior to those in the New, and would not entertain the thought that a heftier American elephant awaited discovery in the unsettled western reaches of the new republic (it did not, of course, as the beast was extinct). Jefferson resented Buffon’s unfair theory and refuted it with a chart comparing the physical features of European and American animal species in his Notes on the State of Virginia.²

Naturalists’ observations, measurements, and drawings, coupled with the efforts of “the father of taxonomy” Carolus Linnaeus and others who developed classification systems for plants and animals, comprised biological knowledge during Jefferson’s lifetime. It seemed self-evident to Jefferson that the same scientific techniques used on plants and animals should be applied to groups of humans. “To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we

have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history," he wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia. "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind." The collection of evidence that might confirm his suspicion was complicated, he mused, by the fact that many of the traits to be compared were intellectual and moral rather than physical.3

It was not out of simple curiosity that Jefferson appealed to natural history, or early biology, to articulate the differences between groups of humans. Wishing above all to ensure the viability of the new republic, he contemplated policies that would keep the inferior qualities of blacks—which he theorized included a primitive and unruly conception of political action—from contaminating the white population. Solutions, he wrote, might include barring them from the new nation altogether and banning intermarriage with whites. With these political aims clearly articulated, Jefferson anticipated the authoritative science that would place blacks and whites in their proper taxonomic slots.4

As Jefferson wrote Notes on the State of Virginia in the early 1780s, the young German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach was measuring the skulls and cataloging the physical features of people around the world, formulating a classification system for humans based on geographic origins. He concluded that regardless of physical differences, humans were all one species. Rigid categorization was impossible because "you see that all do so run into one another, and that one variety of mankind does so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them."5 Although Blumenbach emphasized the unity of mankind and the endless combinations and shades of their physical features, in 1795 he jettisoned his increasingly complicated geographical categories in favor of five general racial categories, with five corresponding skin colors. He has long been known for this seminal contribution to scientists' racialized thinking and connected with the origins of scientific racism.6

In the Age of Enlightenment, scientific knowledge emerged as a major political authority. Still, it frequently contended with religious belief. How groups of humans came to look and act so differently from one another was a question that

4 Ibid., 229-30.
6 Historians have shown that this view is oversimplified, but the opposite tendency to cite selected evidence to prove that Blumenbach was not racist is perhaps just as shallow. See Sara Eigen, "Self, Race, and Species: J. F. Blumenbach's Atlas Experiment," The German Quarterly 78, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 281-82. For more on Blumenbach's ambiguous legacy, see Raj Bhopal, "The Beautiful Skull and Blumenbach's Errors," BMJ: British Medical Journal 335, no. 7633 (December 22, 2007): 1308-9.
many looked to scientific authority to answer. Jefferson had noted the open question of whether races were “originally ... distinct” or “made distinct by time and circumstances.” In other words, had races of men originated separately, or had the forces of nature caused them to diverge over time from a single ancestor? Later framed as “polygenesis versus monogenesis” (multiple versus single origins), the argument bore both political and religious implications. For example, those who wished to continue viewing slaves or conquered people as naturally inferior preferred the idea that groups of people were separately created. But such a view did not fit the Biblical account of Adam, so was rejected by many. As Blumenbach’s ambivalence indicates, the tools and evidence of the natural historian made an inadequate case either way. The answer to this question would have to wait for a radical recasting of biology in evolutionary terms. Charles Darwin came down on the side of monogenesis—but in spite of religion, not because of it.

The Evolutionary Paradigm

During the several decades preceding publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, ideas about racial difference developed alongside, and sometimes in defiance of, ideas about evolution. These ideas were inspired by the social and political imperatives of classifying those different from the empowered (and increasingly imperial) white men. The nineteenth century witnessed a flood of ethnological writings espousing a racial hierarchy with whites at the top. Supported by the popular pseudoscience of phrenology (according to which the physical dimensions of a person’s head corresponded to mental ability), dozens of writers in Britain and America, professionals and amateurs alike, reiterated the claim that whites were inherently, provably superior to all others. The idea of separate and unequal races swiftly gained a foothold among white Americans encountering Mexicans and Indians, and was warmly embraced in the slave-holding South. Racialism became a part of American identity and ideology during this time, contributing to the evaporation of national qualms about expansionism.7

In novel ways, power and worldviews were in transition during the late 1700s and early 1800s. As one monarchy after another fell to revolution and as the church lost its age-old grip on the hearts and minds of the people, science stepped in as preeminent successor. Perhaps the most blatant way that science challenged religion was by suggesting alternatives to God’s intentional creation of living things. Natural scientists had made such suggestions long before Darwin finally (and nervously) published his theory in 1859. Probably the most significant early evolutionist was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Working in the early 1800s, he detected that organisms changed over very long periods of time by adapting to their environments. He thought all animal species could be classified in a single chain from the simplest to the most complex, their development driven by a

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“complexifying force.” Though it was not a pivotal element of his theory of evolution, Lamarck is best known today for insisting on the inheritability of acquired characteristics. A common illustration is Lamarck’s example of the neck of the giraffe: the neck would grow longer during a giraffe’s lifetime by stretching higher into the trees for food, and that giraffe’s offspring would be born with longer necks. This proved inaccurate, but “Lamarckism” remained a key part of later evolutionary theories.

Darwin made a radical break with the idea, held by all evolutionary thinkers before him, that the array of living species represented the outcome of a preordained or cosmically ordered plan. Rather, for Darwin, changes in populations were essentially random and open-ended. Darwin replaced the idea of an unfolding, orderly pattern of species with evidence that evolution proceeded without goals or direction. According to his findings, species could not be thought of as fixed, idealized types created all at once by an omnipotent God, with man at the top of the hierarchy.8

Darwin believed that all organisms on earth descended from a single common ancestor. Perhaps his abolitionist heritage and disgust with slavery drove him to prove that all men were biological equals, as shown by their common descent. If black people had been created separately or had evolved independently, as some biologists and other thinkers proposed, then their enslavement could be viewed (many slaveholders reasoned) as no worse than owning livestock. Many believed that white ownership of black people was simply an expression of the natural order, but Darwin was driven to prove the biologically inherent equality of all men.9

If it was Darwin’s aim to put an end to such justifications of slavery, his theory had an ironic effect when unleashed in society. Its elegance, novelty, and seemingly natural tendency to apply to so many areas of inquiry gave new life and language to old ideas about human difference. Slavery and social inequality formerly justified by classification systems now fit neatly into an evolutionary hierarchy, with oppressed groups as the “least evolved,” the “unfit,” or the losers in the struggle for existence.10 Many drew analogies between the animal kingdom and human society that Darwin never intended, including the ranking of earlier and simpler species (or more primitive cultures) as “lower” on an evolutionary scale. Actually, in his notebooks, Darwin continually reminded himself not to refer in his publications to “lower” or “higher” species.11

Darwin’s challenge to polygenists’ ideas about separate origins and

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permanence of racial groups was no help to black slaves in America. Even the monogenists—those who believed all of mankind derived from a single ancestor, whether for religious or scientific reasons—viewed racial difference as more or less fixed, since the timeline of environmentally produced change was so long. The polygenists enjoyed a heyday in the press and politics of the American South in the years leading up to the Civil War, as their views supported the idea that black people were slaves by nature. They preferred to see races as distinct species and asserted that mixed-race offspring were less fertile and hardy than “racially pure” individuals.

But the outcome of the war abruptly ended race-related scientific debate between monogenists and polygenists. With the question of slavery decided through military force and legal measures, including a set of amendments establishing the letter of equality for blacks, the motivation disappeared from the polygenist argument, its tenuous bases exposed. The new, evolution-based biology roundly rebuked and discredited notions of races as separately created species. Even so, the vast majority of monogenists fit racial inferiority into an evolutionary framework, seeing “primitive” people and blacks as populations that had failed to evolve along with the European races: “outcasts from evolution.”

**Darwinism in American Society**

The economic and social philosophies of Herbert Spencer, a British sociologist who coined the term “survival of the fittest,” earned widespread popularity in the United States after the Civil War. Spencer theorized that evolutionary principles such as natural selection governed societies as well as individuals, and that competition promoted change and progress. Social Darwinism was more Lamarckian than Darwinian, because Spencer believed that improvements among social groups could be passed on to later generations. Spencer advocated a *laissez-faire* capitalism that allowed the fittest businessmen to prosper, and felt that the meddling intervention of social programs for the poor upset this natural process. He thought that conflict between races contributed to social progress, since inferior groups would be survived by the more able. His American counterpart, Yale professor William Graham Sumner, went further, suggesting that slavery benefited society by providing superior groups the leisure time to invent cultural refinements.

Monogenists had won the debate over human origins due to the changed postwar political landscape in the U.S., and due to emerging evidence from archaeology and paleontology of a single origin for all humans. In the late 19th century, evolution was accepted as a scientific certainty, but Darwinism was actually

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out of favor. Instead, the dominant notion of evolution was progressionist—a belief that evolution (true to its Latin root, ēvolūtiō, meaning the action of unrolling a scroll) proceeded along a fixed path. This framework had its origins in the 1860s, coincident with but not necessarily related to Darwinism, when archaeologists unearthed primitive tools and postulated the mental and cultural inferiority of earlier peoples. Anthropologists, continuing their studies of “savage” cultures in Africa and Australia, drew a parallel between earlier civilizations and these groups. Victorian explorers saw such people as intellectually and morally stunted, essentially as failures to evolve (see Figure 1).14

Figure 1: Comparison of Darwinian evolution (left) and the progressionist model generally accepted, and employed by evolutionary anthropologists, in the early 20th century (right). In the developmental model, “races” have branched off at an earlier stage of evolution, creating a hierarchy of development. Illustration from Peter J. Bowler, Evolution: The History of an Idea (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

Related to this was the work of one of Darwin’s contemporaries and supporters, the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” This phrase encapsulates his recapitulation theory, which held that the stages of an organism’s development from embryo to adult repeat the earlier evolutionary stages of that animal. More-complex organisms were simply versions of less-complex organisms which had passed through additional stages (see Figure 2). This made it possible to equate the “inferior” intellect of “savages” with that of white children. In Germany, Haeckel listed the features of dark races that indicated their “retardation of growth,” as did like-minded progressive-evolutionists in America. Haeckel’s legacy is twofold. His richly and sometimes colorfully illustrated works helped popularize the fact of evolution in Europe. But his work was a key influence on the racial policies of fascism, particularly Nazism, by providing a racial and biological rationale for eugenic policies.15

Figure 2. An illustration from Ernst Haeckel’s 1874 book Anthropogenie, showing a fish, salamander, turtle, chick, pig, cow, rabbit, and human at various stages of development.

15 Ibid., 191-93.
The idea of a hierarchical, progressive evolution infused public debates about evolution. In 1925, *The State of Tennessee v. Scopes* brought national attention to evolutionary theory and the question of whether it should be taught in schools. The courtroom battle between the atheist lawyer Clarence Darrow and the fundamentalist politician William Jennings Bryan gave the trial a dramatic legacy and painted evolutionary debate as primarily religious. The trial weighed heavily on civil rights issues, however, and not just in the Jim Crow South. A popular motif in the Northern press was a view of monkeys as actually more evolved than humans; the *Chicago Defender* gave this idea a racial theme in a cartoon showing two monkeys watching a lynching while one says to the other, “Joe, do you believe fiends like these are descendants of ours?” (see Figure 3). Referring to lynching, a syndicated African-American columnist asked, “Who ever heard of a monkey that would burn another monkey alive?”

Figure 3. Cartoon by L. Rogers for the black newspaper *Chicago Defender* during the Scopes trial. Reprinted in Jeffrey P. Moran, “Reading Race into the Scopes Trial,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (December 2003), 897.

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Many black commentators charged that the anti-evolution movement was driven by Southern whites' fear of the racial implications of Darwinism. Common ancestry of black and white races threatened the idea of God-given white supremacy that stood behind racial separation laws originating in the 1880s. At the same time the trial was unfolding, anti-miscegenation laws preventing the intermarriage of black and white people were under consideration by Southern legislatures. Scopes is frequently characterized as a dispute between the North and the South. Northern black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the trial, "The folk who leave white Tennessee in blank and ridiculous ignorance are the same ones who would leave black Tennessee and black America with just as little education as is consistent with fairly efficient labor and reasonable contentment." Some excoriated Bryan for his longtime silence on race issues; as the Great Commoner, he never seemed to include blacks in his conception of the common people.¹⁷

The Scopes fracas coincided with a "nativist" trend of thought that eschewed assimilation and miscegenation between truly "American" Nordic races and all other outsiders. The writings of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard illustrate the nativist stance. Grant was a lawyer and physical anthropologist whose infamous *The Passing of the Great Race* warned of the imminent disappearance of the advanced white "Nordic" race due to out-breeding by "inferior stocks." Stoddard was a journalist and multidisciplinary (including anthropology) academic whose *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* carried a similar warning in the context of the collapse of colonialism; he advocated a eugenic separation of the world's "primary races" so as to preserve their purity. Both men thought in a Social Darwinian framework, which took for granted that the mechanism of "survival of the fittest" applied to societies as well as organisms; their mission was to help the white Nordic race win the struggle for existence. While they borrowed the authority of evolutionary theory to give scientific credence to their views, their conception of evolution was technically non-Darwinian. While Darwinian evolution is chaotic, open-ended, and branching, the evolutionary anthropologists of the early 20th century saw evolution as linear and hierarchical; organisms including people all passed through the same stages of evolution on their way to their current form; some simply had passed through more stages than others. Thus human races were variably evolved.

A key passage by Grant employs explanations of biological heredity and human evolution. In this formulation, more than one race can be excellent or "specialized," but any mixture of racial types, even between superior individuals, causes genetic degradation:

Two things are necessary for the continued existence of a race: it must remain itself, and it must breed its best. Every race is the

¹⁷ Ibid.
result of ages of development which evolves specialized capacities that make the race what it is and render it capable of creative achievement. These specialized capacities (which particularly mark the superior races), being relatively recent developments, are highly unstable. They are what biologists call “recessive” characters; that is, they are not nearly so “dominant” as the older, generalized characters which races inherit from remote ages and which have therefore been more firmly stamped upon the germplasm. Hence, when a highly specialized stock interbreeds with a different stock, the newer, less stable, specialized characters are bred out, the variation, no matter how great its potential value to human evolution, being irretrievably lost. This occurs even in the mating of two superior stocks if these stocks are widely dissimilar in character. The valuable specializations of both breeds cancel out, and the mixed offspring tend strongly to revert to generalized mediocrity.\(^\text{18}\)

Stoddard wrote that, were whites to be bred into extinction by other races, it would mean that “the race obviously endowed with the greatest creative ability ... had passed away, carrying with it to the grave those potencies upon which the realization of man’s highest hopes depends. A million years of evolution might go uncrowned, and earth’s supreme life product, man, might never fulfill his potential destiny.”\(^\text{19}\)

Nativists achieved a major legal objective with the passage in 1924 of the Johnson-Reed Act, which set quotas for new immigrants to the U.S. according to their national origins. It discriminated strongly against the southern and eastern European countries in favor of the more traditionally “Nordic” northern and western countries. It also effectively barred Asians. The story of “white” European immigration is intimately tied to the concept of race that has so long been connected with evolutionary theory. U.S. citizenship was based on “whiteness” from the beginnings of the republic, but problems emerging from mass immigration made it useful to think about the Irish and Greek immigrants, for example, as belonging to different races. Racializing certain immigrants was a way to set them apart from other whites deemed fitter for American citizenship. But these races became difficult to distinguish, and the need for distinction was diminished by the anti-immigration law. As disputes regarding segregation flared up, whiteness became a way to elevate one’s own status in relation to blacks. Eventually the races of white people converged into one, in opposition to blacks. Viewed this way, race is primarily a political and social construct with little or no basis in biology.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1920), 304.

This idea was the essence of the post-World War II manifesto of an international organization of scientists on the question of race in 1950. The horrors of Nazi racial hygiene, ostensibly traceable to the eugenic thought that arose with the development of genetics, had forced scientists to confront the persistent view that "race" was biologically hard-wired. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its statement "The Race Question," concluded that mankind is a single species, made up of populations of genetic groups. The term race, it suggested, should be replaced with ethnicity. The statement read in part, "For all practical social purposes, 'race' is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth" which has "created an enormous amount of human and social damage."21

**Conclusion**

A pressing political need to view some groups of people as scientifically inferior to others existed at the founding of the United States. Many looked to biological knowledge to provide the evidence for this presupposition. Because the implications of evolutionary theory seemed so powerful for society, and because evolutionary theory inherited the question of racial difference from classification-based biology, evolution and race were persistently linked. The problem became a distinctly American one as race problems persisted through the Civil War, through Reconstruction, and beyond. At the same time that it was connected with race tensions, evolutionary theory was shunned in education. Few American children learned of its explanatory power in the life sciences, but many absorbed the "wisdom" of its racial implications. The generations of Southerners who would deal directly with integration of its schools might easily have bought into the supposed social and racial implications of evolutionary theory, without understanding how evolution worked. This set the stage for resistance to civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s based on underdeveloped and uneducated ideas about evolutionary theory.

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The 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education made segregation illegal, but the struggle for civil rights wore on. Following Brown, the peculiar, multifaceted American relationship with evolution infused debates over desegregation for more than a decade. The characterization of black people as monkeys and apes revealed the tenacity of longstanding notions of a racial evolutionary hierarchy. Faced with the threat the Brown decision posed to their social order, segregationists formulated scientific rationalizations of segregation that appealed to the idea that some people were more evolved than others. In particular, they latched on to a new theory of human evolution emphasizing racial origins, proposed by a prominent anthropologist. Such arguments met opposition from scientists whose understanding of the nature of race had been honed by the recent “modern synthesis” of Darwinian evolution and Mendelian genetics, which had established mathematical laws of heredity and the concept of dominant and recessive traits. Sociologist Herbert Spencer had borrowed from the biological authority of evolutionary theory in his “survival of the fittest” doctrine that had enthralled American industrialists and politicians in the late 19th century; similarly, segregationists and moderates intoned the mantra of “evolution not revolution” in the 1960s to stall change for blacks, while simultaneously some scientists reported them “less evolved” than whites biologically.

Of Monkeys and Men

Stephen Jay Gould, who died in 2002, is perhaps the best known contemporary popularizer of evolutionary theory. A paleontologist and biologist, he wrote several books on evolution for general readers and spoke out against teaching creationism in schools. His 1981 book The Mismeasure of Man is an anti-racist critique of biological determinism, the belief that “the social and economic differences between human groups—primarily races, classes, and sexes—arise from inherited, inborn distinctions and that society, in this sense, is an accurate reflection of biology.” In it, he lambasted IQ testing as scientifically useless and rejected the idea of an evolutionary hierarchy of races that had persisted through the civil rights era. During his lifetime, he championed evolutionary theory and witnessed a sea change in biological and anthropological thought on racial differences. But the generation before him confronted these issues earlier and influenced the politics of his science.

Gould grew up in Queens in a household that revered learning and social justice. His father, Leonard, was a court stenographer and self-taught naturalist who made regular trips with his son to the American Museum of Natural History. In 1965, Leonard penned a letter to the editor of the American Anthropologist:

Sir:
Recently, in a New York Times account of a civil rights demonstration, I read that Southern racist hooligans had hurled the epithets "black ape" and "monkey" at Negro demonstrators.

Later the same day, in an article on the physical distinctions of man, contained in a collection of papers on human evolution, I found myself gazing at an illustration depicting certain skeletal features in a Macaque, Chimpanzee, Negro and Gorilla.

Suddenly, my past vague uneasiness over this all-too-frequent practice in anthropological material changed to dismay and outrage.

I respectfully submit ... Negro = Man, and should be so designated in such figures. ... In light of recent history, this constant grouping of Negroes with apes and monkeys is, objectively, mischievous and incendiary. It is fraught with havoc, and should be stopped.

Leonard Gould argued that it was improper to compare a race with a species, and cited seven examples from three recent collections of anthropological writings. All were by University of Zurich anthropologist Adolph H. Schultz, identifying certain skeletal specimens or sets of data as "negro" in comparison with other primate species. Sometimes, Schultz identified another set of data as "white" in comparison with the "negro" set.22

Schultz responded angrily in a letter published several months later. He described Gould as a layman who had taken the citations out of context and was unqualified to understand why the distinctions were necessary in each case cited. Schultz wrote that he provided "subspecific" labels for the humans but not the other primates because too little was yet known about their subdivisions. He wrote:

There is no need for further explanations because the real issue leads ultimately to the question whether students of human evolution should revert [sic.] the shackling consideration of the unpredictable feelings of laymen and carefully avoid publishing anything that might "outrage" them in their fanatic struggles with formerly religious and today racial problems. Instead of following Mr. Gould’s absurd request to stop referring to Negroes in primatological publications, I rather urge editors of scholarly journals to stop accepting communications which are so poorly informed as to serve no good cause.23

But the American Anthropologist did not stop accepting Gould’s

communications. It published another of his letters countering that Schultz had avoided the real question: scientists’ responsibility to consider the social impact of their work:

The issue is not, as stated by Dr. Schultz, whether students of human evolution should be shackled by the feelings of laymen. Rather, the question is whether, through the use of careless comparisons, they forget that it is humans, and their relationships in society, whose evolution they are studying. For those who prefer the ivory tower, I recommend the study of invertebrates, in whose world there is no discrimination. There they need have no concern with lay opinion.24

This exchange calls attention to the struggle among anthropologists to professionalize their discipline by excluding amateurs. Curious, self-taught naturalists had been the original anthropologists in the 1800s, collecting specimens around the world and writing up their findings for general audiences. But as the discipline gained traction in universities in the mid-1900s, the new professional anthropologists weeded interested non-academics out of anthropological societies. On one hand, this meant the undermining of some reasoned contributions by laymen such as Gould; on the other hand, professionalization also helped discredit segregationist writings by nonprofessionals. The American Anthropologist printed this spat between layman and professional because the topic—notions of human evolution as related to perceptions of race—drew heavy debate at this time. Evolution was fast taking over as the primary framework for anthropology, which had previously been seen as a science of classification and anthropometry (the measurement and comparison of human features).

In debates over the nature of evolution, scientists sometimes raise creationism as a spectre, like the ghost of Galileo. In placing Gould’s concern among “fanatic struggles with formerly religious and today racial problems,” Schultz referred to Scopes-era debates over the implications of evolutionary theory for religious tenets. He grouped civil rights advocates with others who let their emotions or beliefs overcome the logic of established science. During the 1950s and 1960s, scientists on different sides of the race debate rhetorically placed their opponents in the creationist camp when at odds over evolutionary concepts. This was a way of saying that one’s opponent had let ideology cloud scientific judgment.

Finally, the Gould-Schultz exchange highlights a central question of the time in scientific circles, one still unanswered: To what extent should scientists be concerned with the societal implications of their work? Given the rapidly accumulating public authority of science during this time (not to mention its skyrocketing federal funding), many scientists argued that there was no longer such thing as “pure research.” Although some disagreed, a rough consensus was emerging among physical and biological scientists that scientific work carried grave

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responsibilities. Social scientists, of course, chartered their developing fields on the notion that scientific methods could and should apply to social problems. Gould essentially called on anthropologists for responsibly accurate usage of evolutionary concepts related to race. Correctly viewing species as the evolutionary unit, he saw no justification for indicating subspecies, or race, on selected specimens, as Schultz had done.

Whether or not anthropologists should have felt any responsibility for racist remarks characterizing black people as monkeys, such slurs were common in the 1950s and 1960s. In a March 1956 speech about the bus boycott by black passengers in Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr., said that pregnant black women boarding buses there had been told by drivers to “go to the rear and stand with the rest of the black apes.” When King was indicted for conspiracy under an anti-boycotting law in Montgomery County, a black woman testified during his trial that bus drivers had called her and others “ugly black apes.” Coretta Scott King also recalled the name-calling on Montgomery buses: “Frequently the white bus drivers abused their passengers, called them niggers, black cows, or black apes,” she wrote.

Desegregation placed crowds of racist whites in the public eye, revealing their ugliest habits, including persistent comparisons of black people to apes and monkeys. In 1956, a crowd of 150 white people gathered to thwart the registration of black students at a Mansfield, Texas, high school. R.D. Gardner, a member of the crowd, brought a pet monkey which carried a sign reading, “I want to play football for Mansfield High.” According to a news report, the crowd jeered at the monkey and someone said, “Look at the little Negro monkey. Does he want to get into school?” The same crowd had hung two “Negro effigies” outside the school and threatened Episcopal priest D.W. Clark, who had walked into the crowd to discuss brotherly love and tolerance. He was escorted from the scene by a Texas Ranger.

In 1959 in the Chicago suburb of Deerfield, Illinois, a minister who publicly supported an integrated housing construction project received an anonymous letter telling him to “go ahead and live with those black apes and let your children marry them and present you with a nice dark brown grandson or granddaughter.” During a protest march of 1,200 blacks against segregation in Greensboro, South Carolina in 1963, sixty white youths chanted at them, “Five, six, seven, eight, we don’t want to integrate. Seven, eight, nine, ten, we don’t want the monkeys in.”

The Ku Klux Klan was a vitriolic source of such language, which seemed all the more menacing in its appeal to a higher power. In May 1964, Atlanta lawyer J.B.

Stoner, vice presidential candidate for a fringe political organization, the National States Rights Party, told a crowd of Klansmen that included children: “People in other parts of the country like to think of niggers as human beings because they have hands and feet. So do apes and gorillas have hands and feet. If a nigger has a soul I never read about it in the Bible. The only good nigger is a dead nigger.” In September 1964, 400 Ku Klux Klan members rallied at Stone Mountain, Georgia, where the Klan had been reborn in 1915. A minister from Chattanooga, Tennessee gave the convocation, which included: “Our Father, who art in heaven ... put grace and grit in the white Caucasian people ... to destroy the black ape race.” In October 1967, a 30-car caravan of Klansmen paused near Kokomo, Indiana, to burn a cross in a roadside meadow and address a small audience that gathered there. Grand Dragon of Indiana William Chaney told the audience that he was a Christian whose answers to questions about race came from in the Bible, including a firm belief in segregation. The Negro, he said, was much closer to the ape than any other living creature. Then some of the Klansmen yelled “black ape” at a carload of blacks who passed by the scene.

Some whites not necessarily identified with the Klan continued to taunt black demonstrators by comparing them with monkeys. In 1964 seven members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People attempted to make a statement outside the state capitol in Jackson, Mississippi. A white crowd there threw pecans at them and said, “Let’s feed the monkeys.” In June 1967, a mob of 200 whites yelled “Get the black apes” as they rushed toward a group of blacks celebrating passage of the Civil Rights act in St. Augustine, Florida. Local policemen reportedly prevented a physical clash.

In 1965, Los Angeles Police Chief William Parker made a now-infamous comparison of Watts rioters when he said that “one person threw a rock and then, like monkeys in a zoo, others started throwing rocks.” The New York Times printed the comment in a brief article on Parker and pointed out that a few years earlier, a group of 30 ministers had accused Parker of being “anti-Negro” and asked to have him removed from office. “The chief is looked upon here by liberals as an ultra-conservative,” the Times’ L.A. correspondent wrote. “His attacks on the United States Supreme Court’s civil liberties decisions have helped bring this about. Once he said that an ‘organized minority’ was trying to undermine police effectiveness. Again he said that Chief Justice Earl Warren’s ‘legal idealism’ was a real social danger.”

Calling black people monkeys and apes was a common form of verbal abuse.

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32 “’State’ and Kokomo Klan Members Burn Cross in Meadow Here,” Kokomo Morning Times, October 16, 1967.
in the 1950s and 1960s, and was connected with segregationist political leanings and white supremacy groups. This trend overlapped with the publication and promotion by segregationists of scientific evidence that black people were indeed biologically less evolved than whites.

*On the Origin of Races*

In 1962, Alabama remained in open defiance of the federal mandate to integrate public schools. Its newly elected governor, George C. Wallace, had campaigned on “segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Just after Wallace’s election, retired University of North Carolina biologist Wesley Critz George hosted a press conference in the new governor’s office to announce the results of his recent report, commissioned and paid for (with state funds) by Wallace’s predecessor. Among other pieces of scientific information, George told reporters that the Negro race was 200,000 years less evolved than the white race. He said the race problem was biological, that whites had larger brains and other indications of advancement that set them apart from blacks. School integration would result in significant degradation of whites’ genetic material, he said.36

George was a member of segregationist organizations in North Carolina and had been working on a science-based argument against integration since before the *Brown* decision. Like the nativists of the previous generation, he thought the white race should be guarded against mixture with inferior strains, and he concluded *Brown* was a grave mistake decided on flimsy evidence. He felt that blacks could be proven to have inferior intellectual capacity. His method was to meticulously amass quotations from geneticists, anthropologists, and other scientists that supported his thesis of the inherent inferiority of blacks. Many of these authorities repudiated the findings of the “George Report” and said that their words had been taken out of context.37

Others did not, including physical anthropologist Carleton Coon, from whose research the evidence for differential evolution of races was primarily drawn. Coon had been a professor of physical anthropology whose work revolved around analyzing and classifying human remains to create a system of identifying features of man, thus tracing his history. He was president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. His book *Origin of Races*, a thick volume that pulled together and analyzed large amounts of fossil evidence, proposed a radical new way to view human evolution. Mankind, Coon said, could be traced to five different earlier ancestors of the species *Homo erectus*, each of which had evolved into *Homo sapiens* at different times. The Caucasian, or white race, had crossed that threshold some 200,000 years before the Congoid, or black race. Coon concluded that “the subspecies that crossed the evolutionary threshold into the category of *Homo*

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36 “Study Claims Negro Evolution 200,000 Years Behind Whites,” *Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, Mississippi), October 4, 1962.
sapiens the earliest have evolved the most, and ... the obvious correlation between the length of time a subspecies has been in the sapiens state and the levels of civilization attained by some of its populations may be related phenomena.”

Presented in the midst of intense national debate over school integration, the metaphor of differential evolution for racial inequality was powerfully simple. Segregationist writers like George and Northern businessman Carleton Putnam immediately co-opted it to argue against school integration. Putnam was from a wealthy New England family, had made a fortune by starting his own airline, and retired early to write a four-part biography of Theodore Roosevelt, the first volume of which was well received by critics. He abandoned that project when the turmoil caused by integration in Little Rock caught his attention. Convinced science could show that blacks were inherently incapable of attaining levels of civilization equal to that of whites, convinced (like the nativist writers he admired) that the genetic mixture of races would lead to the downfall of white civilization, he started a campaign to discredit the Brown decision and school integration. He wrote an “open letter” to President Eisenhower, mailing the letter to newspapers, many of which published it. Segregationist organizations in the South embraced this “Yankee” warmly, forming the Putnam Letters Committee to disseminate his arguments. He then published a book, Race and Reason, with a foreword signed by a dozen scientists avowing its accuracy.38

Putnam was Coon’s cousin and the two carried on a regular correspondence. Like George, Putnam incorporated the 200,000-years hypothesis into his writings and speeches after Origin of Races was published. Rightly sensing that his impressive academic credentials would have been at risk through public connection to the segregationist cause, Coon carefully distanced himself from works such as the George Report and Race and Reason, preferring to take no stance on the race issue and let readers decide for themselves based on the evidence. Repeatedly he claimed that there were no contemporary racial implications in Origin of Races. Coon also declined all invitations to join segregationist organizations. Privately, however, he carried on correspondence with segregationists including Putnam, read drafts of their work, and offered advice.39

Origin of Races was widely reviewed in the scientific and popular press, with almost all reviewers noting the societal implications of Coon’s conclusions. A former co-author of Coon’s noted, “The volume is difficult to review with complete fairness, since the reviewer is obliged to deal evenhandedly both with the author and with the 2 billion nonwhites who certainly will suffer social and, consequently, physical disabilities as a result of the construction which Coon places upon the Pleistocene evidences of human evolution.”40 Some, but not all, scientists denounced the book

40 Joseph Birdsell, “Review: The Origin of Human Races,” Quarterly Review of Biology 38, no. 2 (June
on scientific bases. Geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky found the theory incompatible with current evolutionary theory, which stressed the continuous nature of evolution and viewed races as populations of gene frequencies constantly mixing, rather than as sharply defined groups:

Species which succeed each other in time are subdivisions of a continuum, given names for the sake of convenience of those who speak and write about them. To treat “erectus” and “sapiens” as though they were discrete entities which appeared and disappeared on certain dates implies a typological way of thinking of a sort from which modern evolutionism is making itself free. Does Coon really believe that his “erectus” who lived in Africa supposedly some 50,000 years ago was more akin to the much more ancient erectus erectus of Java than to its own descendant sapiens which succeeded him in Africa putatively 40,000 years ago? Such a belief is, I fear, rather more compatible with special creation than with evolution theory. By contrast, contemporaneous species are, in principle, ascertainable biological entities. They are reproductively isolated populations or groups of populations; such species are, at least as a rule, independent in their evolutionary fates, and are unlikely to merge back into a single species.

Ashley Montagu, author of Race: Man’s Most Dangerous Myth, was a member of a group that had diverged from the physical anthropologists to focus more on the analysis of group cultures than on racial classification. Following in the footsteps of Franz Boas, who rejected notions of racial classification as early as the late 1800s, cultural anthropologists incorporated new knowledge about evolutionary theory and genetics to argue against inherent human racial traits, preferring the explanation that human traits are derived from one’s culture. He wrote of Origin of Races, “The African Negroes—Coon’s “Congoids”—would almost seem to have been specially created, according to Coon’s findings.” For isolated populations of erectus to have evolved into sapiens independently would have required the guidance of the same mysterious inner force that Darwinian evolution explicitly rejected, Dobzhansky and Montagu implied.

But the public certainly saw the results of Coon’s work as science, not creationism. Many scientists grew increasingly dismayed by the popular attention Coon’s work received in the hands of George and Putnam, especially in the South. A long publicity battle ensued, with those opposed to the works that drew on Coon’s

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theory and other evidence, such as including IQ testing, claiming science was being deliberately misused for ideological purposes. George and Putnam said these detractors constituted a left-wing conspiracy to keep scientific facts about race from the public.\(^\text{42}\) They also argued that anyone who dared to speak the truth was swiftly drummed out of academic circles, a common assertion of “scientific creationists” then and now.

Mainstream scientists were appalled by the George Report and *Race and Reason*, both of which were used to defend segregation in southern courts. Other scientists sympathetic to the segregationist cause testified that the 200,000-years hypothesis was credible, and Louisiana made *Race and Reason* required reading for all high school students.

Black historian and journalist J.A. Rogers took on the George Report in his column “History Shows,” in the *New Pittsburgh Courier*. He said it was politically inspired, an example of the “usual Dixie junk on race of which there is no end.” Rogers had a theory of his own:

The animal nearest to man is the chimpanzee. In the process of evolution it stood still while man continued upward. Result: no amount of education or culture will make the ape anything else. On the other hand, take a child from the unexplored part of New Guinea, which is said to have the man farthest down, put him among whites in a white school and he will not only absorb that education but might even eclipse some with George’s “200,000 years” start.

On the other hand, had George, as a baby, been lost among the New Guinea natives and reared by them in spite of his so-called white skin and his 200,000 years start, he’d just have been another one of them culturally.

Rogers was author of the multi-volume *World’s Great Men of Color*. The remainder of the column was spent discussing outstanding black scientists and indicating that their accomplishments were far superior to George’s, in spite of his reported 200,000 years’ head start. “This claptrap on race peddled by George ... reminds me of that moony nonsense uttered by certain theologians of the last century as told in [historian] Andrew D. White’s *Warfare between Science and Theology in Christendom*[sic]. In fact, it’s the only form that stupidity has taken in our time.” The book Rogers mentions is an 1898 work by a noted historian about religious resistance to evolutionary theory.\(^\text{43}\)

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Coon's book remained under discussion into the late 1960s. *Time* magazine mentioned it in a 1967 article, “Race and Ability,” noting that the views in *Origin of Races* were not shared by most scientists. The article also described theories about how physical characteristics such as light skin, wooly hair, or slanted eyes had evolved through environmental pressure. Still, it tuned into the more egalitarian stance on race and science held by northern intellectuals and most scientists. The article editorialized:

So meager is man’s understanding of the complicated biochemistry of evolution and of the nonhereditary influences of cultural environment that no one can confidently assign that portion of intelligence with which man was born and that part he acquired. If heredity bestows his capacity to learn, culture decides what he will learn—in some cases, how much he will be permitted to learn. The handicaps under which the U.S. Negro has existed since he arrived in chains are cruelly reflected in his group achievement.44

As late as 1970, the 200,000-years hypothesis was still in use. A writer for *Ebony* complained,

Why do Putnam and his kind harp incessantly on this thesis that the black man is “200,000 years” behind the white man in evolution?... Notice Putnam speaks of blacks in term adults usually use in speaking of children. Everything would be lovely in this society, he holds, if the white majority would just face up to the fact that black people are intellectual children and take whatever stern measures are required to make them behave.45

In many of the assumptions made by segregationist writers promulgating the 200,000 years hypothesis, we can detect evolutionary thought from the previous century. Such thought took “primitive” cultures in Africa as evidence of a naturally occurring hierarchy of race relations, in which less-evolved races not only did not, but could not advance to the level of whites. This argument contained undertones of another evolutionary metaphor, one that echoed Herbert Spencer.

**Evolution, Not Revolution**

During the major era of industrialization that began in the nineteenth century, powerful Americans applied evolutionary theory to society. They used Spencer’s philosophy of “survival of the fittest” to justify depriving lower-class and

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immigrant Americans of safe working environments, humane work hours, and
decent housing. They refused to relinquish power or wealth to the subordinated
classes who labored under them, assuming that their own superior biological and
mental fitness accounted for the difference between themselves and those less
fortunate.

A century later, as blacks increasingly organized and agitated for civil rights,
the appeal of those in power to the authority of evolution followed a similar format.
To blacks and their allies who pressed for immediate and sometimes radical reform,
the new social Darwinists urged a doctrine of “evolution, not revolution.”
Integrationists were counseled to have patience, to let the laws of nature reshape
race relations by a slow, gradual process. The rhymed pair of words easily became a
memorable slogan for moderation in legal and social change, particularly in the
years after the Brown decision as many Southern state and city governments clung
to segregation. Judges, politicians, and commentators used the “evolution not
revolution” metaphor to obfuscate, stall, and argue against civil rights law.

Quite early, civil rights leaders sensed the need to repudiate the idea that
social change for blacks should proceed by evolutionary law. Writing in 1944 for
The Crisis, the official magazine of the NAACP, black novelist Chester B. Himes wrote
about the need for martyrs in the cause of winning civil rights. “Martyrs are needed
to create incidents. Incidents are needed to create revolutions. Revolutions are
needed to create progress ... [A martyr] must be a Negro who will not compromise,
and who does not mind embarrassing his white liberal friends who sincerely believe
that ‘adaptation’ or ‘evolution’ is the best policy for Negroes to follow.” Elizabeth
Waring of Charleston, South Carolina, the outspoken wife of one of the few liberal
southern judges to fight against segregation before Brown, proclaimed in a 1950
speech to black activists that mankind “always has to secure his rights by force,
ever by time or the fancy word, so often misused, ‘evolution.’” 46 The question of
whether to move slowly and carefully or to take radical action would also shape up
as one of the most vexing internal struggles of the civil rights movement.

Whether they opposed or supported civil rights laws, Americans drew on the
explanatory power of the evolutionary synthesis taking shape at just this time,
which tapped into new research in genetics and increased the viability of
evolutionary theory in the life sciences. A 1949 Life editorial attempted to explain
the “facts” of the “evolution of the South”:

Most Southern whites live and die in the certainty that they are
fundamentally different from and better than Negroes. Genetically
absurd though it is, the certainty still exists and will continue to
exist for a long time...Changes in racial relationships are possible
in the South, but they must be the slow changes of evolution rather

46 Chester B. Himes, “Negro Martyrs are Needed,” The Crisis, May 1944, 159, 174; Elizabeth Waring
quoted in David W. Southern, “Beyond Jim Crow Liberalism: Judge Waring’s Fight Against
than the spectacular, overnight changes of sudden revolution.47

Many letters were printed in response to the editorial. One used an awkward genetics metaphor to explain why good race relations were essential, writing that “mutual respect between the two races is the gene of our racial relations evolution.” Two other readers agreed with Life’s “calm, logical approach” to the civil rights issue. “I was born and raised in the South, and in my opinion the problem is being worked out in the Southern part of the nation in an orderly (considering the magnitude of the problem) and evolutionary manner,” wrote one reader, while another agreed that “problems of racial relations must be solved by gradual education and not by immediate legislation.”48

Two other readers abjured the idea that whites and blacks were genetically similar, one calling the statement “absurd” and the other writing:

The person responsible for this editorial has seen fit to resort to the cheapest, lowest type of propaganda by misleading the general public in referring to a similarity of bloodlines in the Negro and white races.

Genetically speaking the bloodline of the Negro, although pure in its own strain, has no more in comparison to that of the white race than the bloodline of a jackass would have in comparison to the hot blood of a thoroughbred.

To this letter, the editors responded, “As to genetics, modern science confirms St. Paul: ‘And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.’”49

Somewhat ironically given scientific developments at the time, the evolution argument was applied to genetic changes in populations—specifically, race mixing. In a letter to the editor of an El Paso, Texas, newspaper, one reader seemed to understand the flow of genetic material between populations as essential to evolution. “Interrmarriage and complete amalgamation of the races of the world undoubtedly will in the course of human events and the evolution of man come at some future time, but evolution travels very slow and we have nothing like reached that stage in human relations yet ... in this country we are not ready for bi-racial schools.”50 Often thus rising explicitly to the surface, a biological context underscored the evolutionary argument.

“Evolution not revolution” most often referred to gradual, non-violent change that was the inevitable result of social progress in a democracy. In December 1954, a county school superintendent in West Virginia’s state capital characterized

48 Henry Magie, Henry O. Weaver, J.K. Lemon, letters to the editor, Life, August 1, 1949, 2.
49 C.G. Holloway and Tom Bailey, letters to the editor, Life, August 1, 1949, 2.
the Brown decision as the instrument of an evolutionary process vastly preferable to sudden change. “The important thing for all Americans to remember is that [the decision] could not have happened in any other country, but America ... that a problem of such major importance could be handled by evolution rather than revolution,” he said. “In a democracy such as ours there can be no backward people, or second- or third-class citizens, if it is to exist as a democracy.” Still, he called for gradualism and moderation from all parties, a position that lumped integration activists with staunch segregationists against the orderly flow of the social universe and bought into segregationist arguments that integration would harm black children. “As a school board member I have no patience with crusaders who would force immediate integration by law irrespective of its impact and effect on the individual Negro child and the school system as a whole,” he said. “On the other hand, I am equally unimpressed by the reckless suggestions of those who would destroy our systems of public education merely to maintain a social caste based on an assumption of white supremacy.”

In 1955, the Christian Science Monitor published an editorial titled “Negroes: Americans First” on the results of the House Committee on Un-American Activities that wove the “evolution not revolution” metaphor into the language of the Cold War. The report had found, they wrote, that “international communism for the past 15 years endeavored to arouse the American Negro, incite him to revolution, and held out the prospect of a ‘separate state’ to be located in the Deep South; and that the Negro had turned his back upon such blandishments, confident that his problems could be worked out within the framework of American institutions.” Thus revolutionary activity was communist and an evolutionary approach was American; the fact that blacks had resisted recruitment “gives support to the fact that the opportunity for evolution, even though less than wholly realized, exerts a stronger appeal than does plotting for revolution.”

More often, however, revolution meant anything, including the Brown decision itself, that nudged the South toward integration. In 1956, C.A. McKnight, editor of the Charlotte, N.C. Observer, said in an interview with Collier’s magazine that the move to full equality must be “evolutionary and not revolutionary.” He said that race relations had deteriorated in the two years since the Supreme Court mandated integration, leading to a radicalized debate. He said he had witnessed a “quiet exodus of moderates from the public debate forum ... I suggest that the NAACP, having won a significant legal victory, should take off the pressure for a while in sensitive areas and turn its talents to the improving of human relations in areas where desegregation is currently feasible.” The evolution slogan was

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53 United Press International wrote up the Collier’s article as a wire story; see McKnight’s quotations in “Editor Says Negro Must Rise By Evolution, Not Revolution,” Delta Democrat-Times, June 7, 1956.
becoming a catchphrase. Herman L. Donovan, president of the University of Kentucky said its successful integration had happened through “evolution, not revolution” five years before Brown. Although originally ordered by a federal court in 1949 to admit a black student to its graduate program in History, since that time others had been admitted and integration “just worked itself out.” Donovan said he had asked, not told, the university’s board of trustees to support integration early on. But the Deep South was different. Donovan said “agitators” were forcing integration in places where the process should be slower. “If it hadn’t been for agitators, the Civil War never would have taken place. If the agitators continue, they may have to put troops in the South, and that would be a terrible thing.”

On the integration battleground of Little Rock, the “evolution not revolution” metaphor gained traction, thanks to its use by judiciary and executive authorities. During the Little Rock ordeal, segregationists truly hijacked the slogan for their own ends. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had used various tactics, including securing a federal court order and calling out the Arkansas National Guard, to prevent black students from entering Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. The U.S. District Court ordered him to stop, and President Eisenhower dispatched troops to Little Rock to ensure the black students’ safety. Faubus appealed the District Court’s ruling to the Circuit Court of Appeals, where to his dismay it was upheld.

Chief Federal Judge Archibald K. Gardner, at 90 the oldest active federal judge in the United States, wrote in his dissent, “Such changes [integration], if successful, are usually accomplished by evolution rather than by revolution, and time, patience, and forbearance are important elements in effecting all radical changes.” Following this lead, Faubus said in a 1958 speech to the state legislature: “There is a law of life that can never be violated or hurried without great harm to all concerned, and that is the law of evolution in relation to social and political changes.” He noted as examples the American Revolution and woman suffrage; the granting of civil rights to black Americans should, he thought, proceed by similar “laws.”

In the midst of the Little Rock crisis, the U.S. Representative from Little Rock, Brooks Hays, a moderate on the race issue, lost his seat in the 1958 election to segregationist write-in candidate Dale Alford. Just after the election, in a speech to a local civic club, he said racial issues should proceed by evolution rather than “revolutionary methods that would create social strife,” and that integrationists should not “change us by force; do not change us overnight.” The following year, he said the cause of blacks in the South had been set back a generation by federal court rulings against segregation. “The Negro may force his way into white schools, but he

will not force his way into white hearts nor earn the respect he seeks,” Alford told a Greensboro audience. “What evolution was slowly and wisely achieving, revolution now has arrested, and the trail of bitterness will lead far.”\textsuperscript{56}

In 1959, President Eisenhower spoke out against the creation of laws designed to speed integration. At a conference, he told 100 members of state advisory committees on civil rights that he had little faith in the ability of laws to “change human hearts or eliminate prejudice,” and that in a democracy public opinion was what really counted. Although America had not attained the lofty ideals on which it was founded, it must progress toward those ideals by evolution, not revolution. “All we can do is hold the line and wait for a change in mental conditions,” he said. One problem, he said, was that Americans were too often “swayed by slogans.”\textsuperscript{57} The following year, Eisenhower gave a speech on U.S. relations with Latin America at a news conference, urging all American nations to assist troubled countries on a slow, steady course as opposed to rapid and violent change:

Each period in history brings its call for supreme human effort. At times in the past it took the form of war. Today it takes the form of social evolution or revolution. The United States will not, cannot stand aloof. We must help find constructive means for the under-privileged masses of mankind to work their way toward a better life.\textsuperscript{58}

Thus the metaphor could be applied to less empowered populations at home and abroad, who would eventually catch up and enjoy the full privileges of freedom and democracy. Incremental changes were proof of this ongoing evolution, proof that change need not be radical, nor mandated even. A 1961 editorial in a North Carolina daily newspaper made the point:

Gov. Sanford has “made history” with a minimum of commotion by appointing a Negro man to the State Welfare Board for the first time. He called the appointment “fair” because of the large number of Negro welfare recipients.

Easy acceptance of the appointment, by the public, indicates there can be such a thing as evolution in racial relations,


and that revolution is not always necessary.\textsuperscript{59}

As it turned out, the idea of evolution without revolution was fated to disappoint. \textit{Time} magazine took a gloomy view of the state of the civil rights movement in 1968, as Richard Nixon’s presidential campaign capitalized on American fears about growing crime rates and urban civil unrest. The article pinpoints an old Spencerian fallacy about inevitable progress lingering stubbornly in the American psyche:

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, most Americans believed that justice was being done to the Negroes, that perhaps the American dilemma was soluble after all. Through presidential orders, civil rights acts and court decisions, the Negro was being propelled upward in legal status. Through generally rising prosperity and later the antipoverty program, the Negro appeared to be making economic progress as well. There were more black faces over white collars, more Negroes going to college, more owning their homes, more being admitted to clubs and fraternities and the ranks of government.

If to the blacks the more still seemed to be very few, it was reasonable to assume that evolution would take care of that. If the white man’s income was still rising faster than the black’s, Negroes were counseled to have patience. ... When blacks sang We Shall Overcome, the last word of the refrain was “someday.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Conclusion}

Partisans argued over the nature of evolution during the civil rights era, while many assumed its tenets indicated that black people were less evolved than whites. Common racial slurs equating blacks with monkeys and apes both reinforced and revealed a popular belief among some Americans in the lower evolutionary status of blacks. The publication in 1962 of Carleton Coon’s \textit{Origin of Races} seemed to bolster this belief with scientific evidence, though it was disputed by scientists at the time. But then, in something of a reverse, segregationists and moderates also appealed to evolution’s slow, steady change in the popular slogan “evolution not revolution,” used to argue against government assistance in securing equal rights for blacks, particularly on the issue of school integration. Taken together, these three types of evolutionary dialogue comprise evidence that the ideas behind evolutionary theory were purloined by segregationists to hamper civil rights progress.

\textsuperscript{59}“Change Made Easy,” \textit{The Robesonian} [Lumberton, NC], July 14, 1961.

\textsuperscript{60}“The Fear Campaign,” \textit{Time}, October 4, 1968.
Conclusion

Historical scrutiny of the entanglement of evolutionary theory and race issues has focused on the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the heyday of scientific racism. Rightfully so. As science ascended in authority after the Enlightenment, it seemed to hold the answers to pressing questions of human difference. Therein, leaders of the developing imperial geopolitical order found the support they sought for exploiting people in conquered lands. A political need to categorize less empowered groups as biologically inferior found ready answers in the classification systems of natural history. A shift from classification to evolution in the life sciences pulled the race question along into the realm of evolutionary theory, where a third issue, religion, already caused explosive tension. Americans were particularly eager to apply evolutionary theory beyond the organismal level, to groups in society. During industrialization and the economic ascendance of the United States, “survival of the fittest” meant that power naturally concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few. Life scientists honed evolutionary theory into a sharper instrument in the early 20th century, incorporating new knowledge about genetics. Many concluded that previous ideas about race were all wrong, and that the new evolutionary synthesis provided scientific support for egalitarianism.

The story continued as debates over race and evolutionary theory reached another apex in the 1950s and 1960s. Language and metaphors drawing on evolutionary theory frequently appeared in discussion about civil rights in the United States. This language ranged from crass name-calling to far more subtle appeals to scientific authority; segregationists contended that black people were less evolved than whites. Respected scientist Carleton S. Coon produced a major work of historical anthropology supporting the idea of differential evolution, and the book’s findings were immediately purloined by segregationists and disseminated throughout the South. Meanwhile, Southern resisters of integration adopted the social Darwinist slogan “evolution not revolution” to argue against enforcement of Brown and other changes toward equal rights.

Many Americans had very different ideas about how evolution worked, to what and whom its laws applied, and when it could actually explain something. Possibly this confusion was related to the paucity of education on biological evolution in public schools. During this same time, biologists achieved a major victory for evolutionary theory against creationists through a nationwide overhaul of high school biology textbooks in response to Cold War pressures for improved science education. The coincidence of these two events opens windows to further inquiry on how race problems affected acceptance of evolutionary theory by Americans.

In the 1960s, many who believed that God had created man also believed that God had created races separately and intended them to stay separate. Segregationist and creationist leanings often, though not always, coincided. Conservatives and
religious fundamentalists found themselves fighting and losing—legally, at least—two battles at once: desegregation and evolution in schools. The scientific debate over the nature of evolution and race, however, might have prevented a united front against a burgeoning literature of “scientific creationism,” which would emerge as evolutionary theory’s foe after the dust had settled over civil rights. In the 1960s, scientists saw race issues as the more pressing social problem, and the clamor for improved scientific research that coincided with the civil rights movement appeared to dampen the religious case against evolutionary theory. But just as the letter of the law in Brown could not change racist beliefs, neither did the insertion of evolution into high school textbooks change religious views on special creation. During the civil rights movement, fundamentalists who established private schools established to keep white students segregated also used these schools to shield them from evolutionary theory.61

The debates over teaching evolution and racial integration share legal history and legal underpinnings. Both issues dealt with states’ rights, and major cases were largely decided by the same system of federal judges and the same Supreme Court. Scientific and social-scientific evidence bore heavily on legal decisions during the Cold War, when scientific advancement and education were generally held crucial to the nation’s future. During this same time, the Broadway play Inherit the Wind (1955) and its film version (1960) dramatically reshaped American memory of the Scopes trial. From the Brown decision in 1954, to 1968, when the Supreme Court invalidated an Arkansas prohibition against teaching evolution in Epperson v. Arkansas, the legal histories of segregation and creationism twined together to help shape American notions of race and evolution.

The popular media also played an important role. During the 1960s, the magazines Time and Life displayed a keen interest in evolutionary theory and advocated its adoption into high school curricula. They enthusiastically explained evolutionary theory, hyped Darwin himself, and pioneered illustrations of genetics and “evolution in action.”62 In their eagerness to promote evolution, they frequently described human races as evolutionary outcomes, an oversimplified concept that, if not outright inaccurate, at least requires a complicated set of qualifications. Evolutionary theory was popularized during the civil rights movement by these publications and others, so an evaluation of their content would be an important part of future research on race and evolution.

The geopolitical context of the American slogan “evolution not revolution” is also ripe for further study. Secretary of State Dean Acheson was fond of the metaphor, using it to argue that some nations should gradually develop democratic structures rather than invite the chaos of a conversion to communism or socialism. Officially, Soviet scientists held vastly different views from U.S. scientists on genetics

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during the civil rights movement. Trofim Lysenko, the director of Soviet biology under Joseph Stalin, insisted that acquired characteristics were inheritable, an idea that bears heavily on questions of race and on “social Darwinism.” Soviet views on evolution and race should be compared to those found in the United States during this time, because the episode of “Lysenkoism” has become the primary historical example of Soviet ideology perverting science.

Also in global politics, many commentators used evolutionary metaphors to describe the emergence and development of African nations at this time. They found it all too easy to stray from the metaphorical sense into the biological when speaking about “primitive” or “less civilized” groups in Africa. The idea of “evolution not revolution” might have channeled scientific authority to promote a particular American foreign policy in Africa, even as it affected domestic policy for blacks at home.

Much more work remains in untangling the connections between race and evolutionary theory. The importance of this project today lies in discovering causes of American resistance to evolutionary theory in biology education. A large and politically active group of Americans has adopted denial of evolutionary theory as an identifying trait. Many consider racial supremacy and denial of evolutionary theory equally outmoded, yet the latter alone persists as a legitimate position in American society. Perhaps the animosity and violence of the civil rights era tainted evolutionary theory and caused dire misunderstandings. For example, creationists frequently accuse evolutionists of racism. Indeed, some claim that the theory itself is inherently racist, and versions of such views are surprisingly widespread. Perhaps further historical investigation can begin to solve the puzzle: What has happened with evolution and race?
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