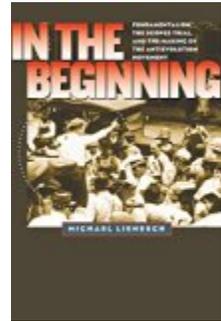


Michael Lienesch. *In the Beginning: Fundamentalism, the Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. x + 352 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3096-3.

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The Making of the Antievolution Movement

In May 2007, a conservative Christian group called Answers in Genesis opened the gleaming Creation Museum in northern Kentucky. The \$27 million facility covers sixty thousand square feet, all of it dedicated to promoting an understanding of the world's origins based on a literal reading of the book of Genesis. The museum touts "scientific" evidence that the world is approximately six thousand years old, and it features dioramas of dinosaurs cavorting with humans. Most scientists—who peg the world's age at 4.5 billion years and contend that dinosaurs disappeared long before humans arrived—have derided the museum as a land of fairy tales. But the museum expects to attract 250,000 visits annually—it drew 40,000 in its first month—and it opened debt-free thanks to the generosity of private donors. Visitors have reported that the museum gave them the "true story" of the earth's history and reinforced their faith. The Creation Museum's success testifies to the continued popularity of accounts of the world's origins based on a literal reading of the biblical creation story.

Michael Lienesch's fine new book, *In the Beginning*, helps us understand the milieu from which the Creation Museum emerged. Lienesch contends that in the years between World War I and the Great Depression, an identifiable antievolution movement took shape. He draws extensively on social movement theory to make sense of the movement's early years. The book demonstrates how opposition to evolution became a cause celebre among conservative Christians, and it illustrates how antievolutionists transformed their ideology into a political move-

ment.

Lienesch begins his narrative by tracing the emergence and early development of fundamentalism, a religious movement that coalesced in the 1910s. Like previous scholars of fundamentalism, Lienesch rejects stereotypes of the movement as a rural, southern phenomenon. He locates fundamentalist origins in major northern cities, such as Boston, New York City, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Lienesch differs from previous scholars who have defined fundamentalism according to its doctrinal characteristics. Fundamentalists, he argues, "were less concerned with creating creeds than with constructing community" (p. 10). He demonstrates how fundamentalists used prophecy conferences, bible camps, denominational structures, and published materials to create a movement with a collective identity. Furthermore, Lienesch details how fundamentalists leveraged a sense of shared identity by mobilizing millions of conservative Americans against "modernism."

By creating institutional and rhetorical structures in which conservative Christians could unite around a shared perception of rising secularity, fundamentalists had laid the groundwork for a mass political movement. But in the early 1920s, they lacked an issue around which they could rally their followers. Evolution became that issue. Though complex and poorly understood by most Americans, evolution "seemed somehow less philosophical and more specific than naturalism, materialism, or skepticism" (p. 70). William Jennings Bryan, who was

not a fundamentalist himself, nonetheless became the foremost antievolution activist, and he connected the teaching of evolution to all manner of ills. The “Boy Orator of the Platte” contended that evolution “denied the existence of a personal and revealed God, destroyed human morality, and created a war of all against all” (p. 71). In short, evolution became the “symbol for everything that was wrong with the nation” (p. 85).

Fundamentalists’ ability to employ evolution as a diagnosis for all that ailed the United States helped them to build alliances with non-fundamentalists, and this coalition building facilitated the transformation of fundamentalism from a religious identity to a mass political movement. In a rich chapter titled “Alignment,” Lienesch lays out how fundamentalists framed evolution as an attack on orthodox Christianity, an assault on home and family, and a boon for radicals of all stripes. Bryan even cast evolution as antidemocratic. Over the course of his career, Bryan had developed a reputation as a champion of progressivism and defender of nonelites. He appealed to them once again by intentionally confusing Darwinism and Social Darwinism in speech after speech. The centerpiece of Darwinism, said Bryan, was a “cruel law ... under which the strong kill off the weak” (p. 87).

Non-fundamentalists bought into this (mis)characterization of evolution, and the resulting coalition of antievolution activists began petitioning state legislatures to rid public schools of the heinous theory. These campaigns took root most strongly in the South, where every legislature, except Virginia’s, entertained vigorous debates over evolution. Five southern states—Oklahoma, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas—passed antievolution bills. Of these, Tennessee’s law achieved the most fame, owing to the 1925 trial of high school biology teacher John Scopes in Dayton. Lienesch recounts the Scopes trial in succinct and lively fashion, though readers familiar with Edward Larson’s excellent book *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and American’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1997) will find little new here. Lienesch’s greatest strength in retelling the oft-told story of Scopes lies in his contention that “one of the reasons the Scopes trial was so significant is ... because it provided the setting for the dazzling use of strategic dramaturgy” (p. 141). Antievolution activists staged a fantastic show in Dayton, and it rallied supporters across the nation.

Commentators focusing on northern media coverage of Scopes assumed that the trial struck a fatal blow for both fundamentalism and antievolution. As subsequent

events showed, however, the two movements were far from dead. In fact, Lienesch argues that antievolution activity climaxed in the years immediately following the Scopes trial, when an “explosion of antievolution activity” resulted in the introduction of antievolution bills in every part of the country (p. 176). Publishers began reducing or even omitting treatments of evolution in biology textbooks. Nativists connected antievolution with traditional values and patriotism, once again showing evolution’s malleability as a diagnosis for America’s problems. Only the crushing onset of the Great Depression forced antievolution activism to the back burner.

Yet campaigns against evolution persisted among conservative constituencies across the country, and in recent years antievolutionists have championed the teaching of Intelligent Design (ID), an alternative theory of the world’s origins, in public high schools. Battles over evolution have shifted from state houses to school boards, but Lienesch contends that the basic structures of antievolution activism animating contemporary movements were in place by the end of the 1920s. The first generation of fundamentalists discovered an issue that had remarkable staying power, and they cobbled together a political movement that has sustained antievolution activism for almost a century now.

Lienesch’s use of social movement theory is both a strength and a weakness. By filtering historical research through the lens of social movement theory, he is able to show not only what fundamentalists thought about evolution but also how they mobilized a diverse constituency against it. But on a few occasions, Lienesch’s reliance on theory threatens to overwhelm the historical narrative. The book’s final chapter, which tracks the various manifestations of antievolutionism from 1930 to the present, attempts to subsume a host of developments under a handful of theoretical concepts. The theoretical concepts Lienesch introduces here are plausible, but without the patient historical work he provides in the preceding seven chapters, this jaunt through eight decades of history risks oversimplification.

But that is a minor quibble. Lienesch’s book succeeds admirably on a number of levels. Lienesch provides a detailed chronological account of early fundamentalism rooted in careful archival work. He offers a model of interdisciplinary scholarship by showing how social movement theory can inform historical research. And most important, Lienesch details how antievolution represents so much more than an “assault on science.” Scientists may scoff at the Creation Museum—and at those who

buy into its presentation of natural history—but antievolutionism is not going away anytime soon. It behooves all of us to understand how this movement emerged and why it persisted. *In the Beginning* is a perfect place to start.

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