

College of William & Mary
Fall 2012

Darwinian Evolution in Politics & Society

Prof. Helen Murphy
Prof. Maurits van der Veen

Class

Mon. & Wed. 3:30-4:50
Location: Morton Hall Room 4
Office hours: Tues. 2:30-4:30pm. (HM)

Office

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Course Description

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection has had an enormous impact not just in the biological sciences, but in the wider world as well. The reverberations of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* can still be felt more than 150 years later. We will examine responses to evolution by natural selection within biology, the social sciences, and among the public at large. We will focus on works by the original authors, rather than later summaries or analyses, so we can get a better feeling for contemporary reactions to Darwin, as well as insight into the way scholars in other disciplines have been inspired by Darwin's theories.

In particular, we will review the scientific building blocks of Darwin's theory and the modern evolutionary synthesis. We will then consider the impact of these theoretical insights on nineteenth-century social science (social Darwinism, eugenics, etc.), Darwinian influences on present-day political science, economics, sociology and psychology, and of course the 150-year old struggle between Darwinism and creationism.

As we shall see, the elegance and simplicity of Darwin's theory has inspired many theoretical innovations in unrelated disciplines, some with immense social impact. To give just two examples: the notion of "survival of the fittest" was used as an argument for empire-building in the nineteenth century, and social Darwinism has often been used as an argument against caring for society's poor. We cannot fully understand the successes and failures of such ideas without explicitly examining their connection to Darwin's theory and its status within the biological sciences.

Course Goals

The goal of the course is fourfold. First, we will learn about the biological building blocks of evolutionary theory. Second, we will see how these building blocks have been applied (and sometimes misapplied) in other disciplines and in public debates. Third, we will gain insights into the development of scientific knowledge: How does the scientific

method work? How does knowledge accumulate (or not) over time? And how important is empirical evidence in all this? Fourth, we will continue the lifelong process of learning to express ideas through the written word and oral communication.

Course Requirements and Assignments

This is a seminar, so you must do all the reading ahead of time and be prepared to discuss it in class. The more you have thought about the readings and their implications, the more interesting and successful our class discussions will be. You are required to hand in an informal typed response/ list of discussion points at the end of each class (it must be completed *before* class).

There will be three writing assignments:

1. A short paper discussing an example in the media from the past 5 years in which Darwinian evolution is misrepresented (2-3 pages). Due Sept. 24.
2. A book review of a book on some aspect of the interaction between Darwinian evolution and the social sciences (5-6 pages) and an audio recording of your book review. Due Oct. 17.
3. A research paper on some issue covered in the course (approx. 15 pages). Due Dec. 5.

We will provide more extensive guidance on each of these assignments well ahead of the due dates. In addition, you are expected to make one in-class presentation based on the topic of your final paper.

You are required to hand in a draft of all writing assignments. Failure to submit a draft will result in an automatic deduction of one letter grade, as will each day the final draft is late.

Grades

The grade breakdown for the class is:

25% participation (this includes written discussion points and in-class participation)

10% writing assignment on misrepresentation of evolution

20% book review and NPR presentation

35% final paper and presentation

Attendance

Attendance is required. Three unexcused absences will result in a decrease of the final grade by one full letter grade. Excused absences include those with appropriate documentation (Student Health, Dean's Office) and those arranged with one of us. You need to let one of us know ahead of time if you cannot make a class! Similarly, if you need an extension on your written assignments, let one of us know in advance. Assuming you have good reasons for absence or extension requests, we are likely to be accommodating.

Additional Policies & Comments

Since this is a seminar class, it is important that we all feel comfortable participating. Remember to help make the atmosphere one of mutual respect in which all voices and ideas can be heard.

We take violations of academic honesty very seriously. All academic work must meet the standards set out in the Honor Code. In particular, if you commit plagiarism on a written assignment and we discover it, we will report the violation to the Dean's office, with all the potential repercussions that implies. The key point is that the work you submit must be your own — not that of a fellow student, nor that of someone whose work you found in the library or online. To that end, we are happy to read and comment on drafts of assignments in advance of the due date. You will also be receiving (and providing) feedback on assignments to fellow students. One of the goals of this course is to help you improve your writing skills; we do not expect the first draft of any assignment to be perfect.

Prof. Murphy's office hours are Tuesdays 2:30-4:30pm. Please do stop by if you have any questions on the reading material, the writing assignments, or the course in general. If you need to reach me to make an appointment, just email me or see me before or after class.

Texts and Other Readings

There is one required text for the course, available at the W&M Bookstore:
Coyne, Jerry. 2009. *Why Evolution is True*. New York: Viking.

All additional readings are available online, on the Blackboard site for the course, or through the electronic journals feature of the W&M library website.

Tentative Schedule

I. Introduction

Wednesday, August 29 Syllabus and overview

II. Basics of Evolution

Monday, September 3 Before Darwin- Biology

Wednesday, September 5 Before Darwin- Social Sciences

Monday, September 10 *Why Evolution Is True* by Jerry Coyne

Wednesday, September 12 *Why Evolution Is True* by Jerry Coyne

III. On the Origin of Species

Monday, September 17 *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin
Draft of Short Paper Due

Wednesday, September 19 *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin

Monday, September 24 *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin
Short Paper Due

IV. Early reactions in the social sciences

Wednesday, September 26 Social Darwinism and the origins of eugenics

Monday, October 1 Social Darwinism in politics and economics
Wednesday, October 3 Imperialism

Monday, October 8 Darwinism, race, and gender in the 19th century
Draft of Book Review Due

V. Modern Synthesis

Wednesday, October 10 Population Genetics and Modern Eugenics

Monday, October 15- Fall Break

Wednesday, October 17 Scopes Trial
Book Review Due

VI. Darwinism and the modern social sciences

Monday, October 22 Game theory
Wednesday, October 24 LIBRARY DAY
NPR Clip Due

Monday, October 29 Sociobiology and Sociology
Wednesday, October 31 Evolutionary Psychology

Monday, November 5 Evolutionary economics
Wednesday, November 7 Evolution and political science

VII. Public debates about evolution today

Monday, November 12 Creationism
Wednesday, November 14 Intelligent Design

Monday, November 19 The Dover Trial

Wednesday, November 21- Thanksgiving Break

Monday, November 26 Public opinion on evolution
Draft of Final Paper Due

Wednesday, November 28 Cutting-edge evolutionary biology

Monday, December 3 Presentations

Wednesday, December 5

Presentations
Final Paper Due