



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

Constructing creationists: French and British narratives and policies in the wake of the resurgence of anti-evolution movements

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 December 2013

Received in revised form

11 February 2014

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Creationism

Evolution

Education

Religion

Discourse

ABSTRACT

Creationism is an ambiguous term used in a variety of contexts: political, scientific, religious and educational. This paper attempts to trace the discourse on creationism in two European countries (France and the United Kingdom) and show how different cultural backgrounds shape the construction of its meaning. The striking difference between the total redefinition of the narration on creationism in France after the Harun Yahya's case, and the practically oriented steady development of the discussion in the United Kingdom seems to result from two different political sensitivities, deeply rooted in local cultures. The goal of my paper is doublefold. It attempts to present the emergence of two distinct incommensurable conceptualisations of a social problem and in the same time it tries to answer how to discuss them in a democratic framework.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

1. Introduction

On the tenth of June 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, one of the most intriguing legal cases commenced in the history of the United States' jurisprudence. William Jennings Bryan, both a long-time Democrat fighting for civil rights and a devout Christian, confronted one of his friends and former supporters – the atheist advocate Clarence Darrow. What was the reason for the quarrel between these two men who were so dedicated to social activism? Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. In 1925 in Tennessee, a young school teacher by the name of John Scopes was accused of having violated anti-evolutionary legislation by mentioning Darwin's explanation of human origins during one of his classes. The American press nicknamed the event "the monkey trial" and presented it as a battle between science and religion (Larson, 2003, p.60–70). Although the traditional view concerning this trial has been largely simplified and deviates from reality,¹ it has forged a way of understanding the term "creationism", which is still widespread among European scholars. Creationism, according to this perception, is mostly an American

phenomenon which is associated with radical Christian Churches and shows the deficiencies of the American public education system. It is quite ridiculous and dangerous at the same time, but thankfully virtually unknown on the Old Continent.

The resolution of the Council of Europe 1580 titled "The dangers of creationism in education"² from 2007 was written in the same spirit after the resurgence of anti-evolutionary contestations all over Europe. It claims that creationism was "for a long time an almost exclusively American phenomenon. Today creationist ideas are tending to find their way into Europe and their spread is affecting quite a few Council of Europe member states."

A difficulty stems from the fact that what truly hides behind the term "creationism" remains ambiguous and unclear. When polls about the public understanding of science show a low level of acceptance of the theory of evolution, their interpretations may differ. It is not easy to answer whether these polls prove that creationism has become a widespread idea or that the level of understanding of science is very low in general (Miller, Scott, & Okamoto, 2006, p.176–178). Moreover, simply because evolution is accepted does not mean that someone agrees with all the principles of Darwin's theory of evolution. Numerous religions (e.g.

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¹ In reality Scopes was not even sure if he had ever taught the theory of evolution. He agreed to testify after local entrepreneurs from Dayton encouraged him to do so. They knew that the mediatized trial will bring attention of the whole country to their city multiplying their profits (Larson, 2003, p.60–70).

² <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta07/eres1580.htm> accessed 25.05.2013.

Buddhism and Hinduism), secular philosophies (early deism, dialectical materialism) and spiritually-based philosophies (the teachings of Teilhard de Chardin, New Age movements) do not deny that evolution took place. On the contrary, they cherish it! Evolution is seen as constant development depending on the cultural context towards spiritual enlightenment, a union with Christ or simply toward a better and more humane world. In other words, evolution becomes here an overarching idea of progress that is very far away from what science truly says about biological processes.

No matter how helpful the history and philosophy of science are in understanding these kinds of issues, their impact on public discourse remains, unfortunately, negligible. Public discourse is shaped by press articles, public declarations, debates between the most radical positions and by official policies. The term “Creationists” is strongly value-laden and is often used to discredit the beliefs of others. By being a political tool in the hands of different religious and ideological groups it is understood differently in diverse cultural and social contexts. Curiously, even in countries which belong to “Western civilization” and which are close to one another in geographical terms these differences may be striking.

The goal of the present study is to compare the shaping of public discourses about creationism after the recent resurgence of movements opposing the theory of evolution in two European countries that were particularly touched by this phenomenon: France and the United Kingdom. It would be worthwhile to study how these dissimilar sensitivities, deeply embedded in the social structure, influence the definitions of creationism and how these definitions help us to address the problem of creationism in general.

2. Methodology

How does one capture and prepare a reliable and revealing investigation of a complex social and cultural phenomenon such as creationism? One answer may be to prepare a quantitative study showing the numbers of people who believe in the theory of evolution in a given country. But, as was already explained, polls use predefined categories which impose a certain understanding of social reality. The best illustration of this sort of bias is the famous American annual poll of the Gallup Institute on how the theory of evolution is perceived among Americans – especially when its categories suggest a particular view of reality to the interviewees; for example, the concept of “theistic evolution” as proposed by the Gallup Institute means that “Humans evolved, with God guiding”.³ But was God intervening in some miraculous way at different stages of human evolution? Or is this just an elegant way of saying that God may have conceived evolution as a way of development for humankind? The former option might be classified as creationism, the latter as evolutionism. Theistic evolution is an unclear concept which might help believers to affirm that they are against unscientific creationism but that they have not given up their faith. Nevertheless, this category does not tell us much about people who declare themselves to be “theistic evolutionists”. Therefore, interpreting the results of the Gallup poll depends entirely on the values that are attributed to the concepts in question by researchers.

Some authors have adopted a different approach and rely on case-based empirical research. Instead of studying what the general population believes in, they study the creationists themselves. We can take here as an example the famous book of Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists*, (2006) which explores the emergence and history of American creationists from the Scopes Trial to Intelligent Design. This is a complete and detailed study of very concrete people living in a

specific cultural and religious environment. However, the borders of the term “creationists” are fickle. Throughout his book Ronald Numbers not only tells us the story of the creationists, but he also builds a vision of the creationists by advancing his own ideas about this category’s content. These are American movements and Churches which have defined themselves in the 20th century as creationists, and mostly Evangelical Protestants, who are the object of his studies. But this category did not have to be built as such. Numbers does not go into the details of Catholic theologians’ discussions over the theory of evolution; he also excludes from his inquiry mainline Jewish communities and ignores the New Age revival of the 1970s. Are any of those people creationists? Not in the widespread social construction of the creationists which was perpetuated by Ronald Numbers but, as we will later see, other definitions including those groups will not only become conceivable, but also more and more prevalent. In this sense, Ronald Numbers’ book cannot be treated only as an objective research study but also as an element of the on-going debate of building a coherent object of historical research.

The present paper does not rely on polls, nor does it try to study “creationist” Churches, associations or individuals. On the contrary, its goal is to focus on those who create categories through discourse: the big press, socially involved scientists, public policy institutions as well as researchers writing about creationism. According to Stuart Hall, discourse is a “group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about the topic.” (Hall, 1992, p.266) Fran Tonkiss adds that “[Discourse] is concerned with the production of meaning through talk and texts” (Tonkiss, 2004) and she follows the Foucauldian thought that underlines the importance of discourse in organising fields of knowledge and practice. To understand who the creationists are it is necessary to understand how and by whom the term is used. As I have already mentioned, researchers preparing quantitative and historical studies do not shape their own research objects arbitrarily; they inscribe themselves in a certain discourse and develop it. The existence of discourse is, therefore, a condition existing *a priori* which should be understood before one plunges into statistics or detailed empirical studies. Finally, this paper is not a review of the literature, nor does it try to present all the sides of the debate, but it does aspire to be an all-inclusive study about the dominant public discourse. Although the criterion may seem to be fickle, the public policy element is usually crucial. A discourse becomes dominant when it moves from academic writings to official statements. In consequence, this paper heavily relies on a few but influential sources from the public policy point of view.

The study will follow narratives in two European countries: the United Kingdom and France, and it will try to present how these narratives create different understandings of the term *creationism*. From the methodological point of view the choice of sources differs in both countries. Centralised French power structures facilitate retracing official scientific/governmental positions that influence the media. On the other hand, in the United Kingdom the importance of multiple non-governmental actors in the creation–evolution controversy requires a more inclusive approach. One may wonder whether this shift to less official sources in the UK does not hinder the objectivity of research, but it must be underlined that the object of this study is public discourse, which is an elusive category in itself. It might be necessary to properly readjust the choice of sources in the two countries in order to capture the crucial differences between their discourses. Further clarifications will be provided in corresponding chapters.

3. France

France is the first of the two countries that this study will analyse. Its strongly centralised political structure and long

³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155003/Hold-Creationist-View-Human-Origins.aspx>.

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