

R. Allen Bolar

Statement of Research Interests

Current

My dissertation is titled “There's Power in the Blood: Religion, White Supremacy, and the Politics of Darwinism in America.” This thesis argues that evolutionary biology has proven contentious in America because of the unique *political* context into which Darwin's ideas emerged. Traditional scholarship most often views resistance to Darwinian ideas as a function of religious reaction or educative failure. I argue that these traditional lenses are less than fully satisfying. A fuller perspective understands the role that politics plays in shaping the epistemic authority of both science and religion. For nearly a hundred years after evolutionary theories began to gain credence in the scientific community, they have generated a political response, which has often taken the form of political resistance.

Evolution became associated with the politics of radical Republicanism after the Civil War and political disagreement led to a decrease in the trust that citizens placed in scientists and educators. The Darwinian revision of the concept of racial variety made a polygenist conception of human origins scientifically untenable and discredited the structural inequalities implied by the rival “American School of Anthropology”. Before Darwin, natural history had formed an important part of the justification for slavery, but after the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, natural history became associated with abolitionists, while also becoming distasteful to the southern planters and slaveholders who had previously appealed to scientific authority for slavery's defense. The role that race played in “politicizing” natural history has had lasting effects, as I show by looking at the political role of Darwinian evolution until the Scopes trial of 1925, as well as the “rationally irrational” forms of resistance to epistemic authority that Darwinian evolution has encountered.

My research examines the incentives that people have to value religious and scientific authority, the ways that democratic citizens acquire knowledge, and the role that partisanship plays in explaining citizens' trust in scientific communication and education. Citizens can benefit from expert testimony, but giving epistemic authority to experts privileges particular individuals, and runs the risk of devolving into undemocratic rule by experts. Science, as a presumed realm of the universal not the particular, has been proposed as a remedy to reconcile democracy with central action, because science relies, like liberal democracy, on reasons that “all could accept.” In addition, it is argued, that science can widen the space for democratic action by providing citizens with reasonable sources of knowledge with which to solve political disputes. However, I argue that science was unable to fulfill this role before the Civil War in the United States, because it was, itself, part of the political process, and the complex history of Darwinian evolution in America hints at some limitations to the role that “objective” expertise can play in arbitrating democratic disputes.

Future Goals

My first goal is to turn my thesis into a publishable monograph. While doing my research, I have grown increasingly interested in the idea of “irrationality” as a mode of asymmetric resistance against epistemic authority. Theories of deliberative democracy rely on the ability of deliberation and discourse to allow citizens to engage in constructive dialogue, and in the process generate better collective decisions. I would like to explore the role of expertise in arbitration between reasoning citizens.

Furthermore, my research on the politicization of Darwinian evolution points to the importance that conceptual categories play in deciding what kinds of arguments count as “reasonable” in democratic discussions. In the nineteenth century, massive inequalities and privileges within the political and social realm were prefaced upon conceptions of the scientific notion of human equality. Like Aristotle, southern slaveholders believed that science and nature demonstrated that social inequality was rightfully based upon natural inequality. The cosmopolitan ethic which embraces all of humankind under one umbrella of moral consideration is analogously prefaced upon the fundamental moral equality of all humans. However, recent discoveries of the capabilities of non-human animals demonstrate the difficulty of grounding a cosmopolitan ethic upon the biological or natural distinctiveness of humans.