

Civic Biology and the Origin of the School Antievolution Movement

ADAM R. SHAPIRO

*Department of History
University of British Columbia
1297 Buchanan Tower
1873 East Mall
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6T 1Z1
E-mail: ashapiro@interchange.ubc.ca*

Abstract. In discussing the origins of the antievolution movement in American high schools within the framework of science and religion, much is overlooked about the influence of educational trends in shaping this phenomenon. This was especially true in the years before the 1925 Scopes trial, the beginnings of the school antievolution movement. There was no sudden realization in the 1920's – sixty years after the *Origin of Species* was published – that Darwinism conflicted with the Bible, but until evolution was being taught in the high schools, there was no impetus to outlaw it. The creation of “civic biology” curricula in the late 1910's and early 20's, spearheaded by a close-knit community of textbook authors, brought evolution into the high school classroom as part of a complete reshaping of “biology” as a school subject. It also incorporated progressive ideologies about the purposes of compulsory public education in shaping society, and civic biology was fundamentally focused on the applications of the life sciences to human life. Antievolution legislation was part of a broader response to the ideologies of the new biology field, and was a reaction not only to the content of the new subject, but to the increasingly centralized control and regulation of education. Viewing the early school antievolution movement through the science-religion conflict is an artifact of the Scopes trial's re-creation of its origins. What largely caused support for the school antievolution movement in the South and particularly Tennessee were concerns over public education, which biology came to epitomize.

Keywords: American Book Company, antievolution, biology education, biology textbooks, Benjamin C. Gruenberg, civic biology, George W. Hunter, science and religion, Scopes trial

The Controversial *Civic Biology*

When the American Book Company (ABC) first published George W. Hunter's *Civic Biology* in 1914, its editors had no way of anticipating

the Scopes trial. They expected some objections to the new book, but when the *Civic* was first released, there was no sense that *evolution* would become so controversial.¹

In fact, when the textbook first came out, the biggest debate among critics was whether it deserved to be called “biology.” As a Cornell botany professor complained, “it is not Biology. ... To say Civic Biology is to my mind an anomaly and the word Biology seems to be put in to bolster up or to give tone to the introduction of certain industrial and domestic work.”² The *Civic* was the first biology textbook to fully integrate the largely separate school subjects of botany and zoology. The ideologies that drove this approach – more than the content of any one part of biology – were responsible for successful opposition to biology education represented by passage of antievolution laws in the 1920’s, especially in Tennessee.

It was not that content of the new textbook was uncontroversial. But the earliest complaints about particular topics reinforced the ABC’s perception that the real concerns were never individual topics, but the overall integration of biology that shaped the *Civic Biology*. This perception was also a byproduct of textbook marketing in this era, in which sales agents were organized by region rather than by subject. Sales agents did not see marketing difficulty in terms of textbook content, but in terms of building relationships with groups that made adoptions.

In February 1915, Frank A. Fitzpatrick, an ABC sales agent, reported problems selling the *Civic Biology* in Boston. Fitzpatrick forwarded a list of suggested revisions to the *Civic Biology* based upon “one of the Boston High School Masters,” objecting to some of the book’s discussion of the transmission of syphilis and discussion of reproduction. Fitzpatrick observed, “in Boston, the School Committee have issued an order that Eugenics is *not* to be taught.”³ Objections over eugenics were connected with Hunter’s treatment of sexuality, a subject the sales agent himself seems to have found uncomfortable.

Dr. Hunter has written a great book. But I am inflicting this letter in long hand to you because I don’t feel that I can dictate what I want to say, and have said, to my stenographer who is a young lady of twenty-six years. Am I old fashioned in this? To how many of

¹ By 1914, many of the pamphlets that comprised *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, had already been published and several of the essays published in these pamphlets directed arguments against Darwinian evolution; however, none of these focused on evolution as a concern for *education*.

² George F. Atkinson to W. W. Drew, September 30, 1915. ABC Archives.

³ Frank A. Fitzpatrick to Benton, February 19, 1915. ABC Archives.