In the spring of 1925, in the sleepy, isolated, southern town of Dayton, Tennessee, a group of local notables gathered at Robinson’s drugstore and hatched a plan to revive their town. Their group included George Rap­pleyea, manager of a local coal mining company that had fallen on hard times. The drugstore conspirators knew that the American Civil Liber­ties Union (ACLU) sought a teacher who could serve as defendant in a case testing the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Promoted by Christian fundamentalists led by William Jennings Bryan, the new law prohibited public school teachers from teaching “any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” Rappeyea pro­posed the school’s football coach and general science instructor, an agree­able fellow named John T. Scopes. Pulled from a game of tennis, Scopes joined the group and agreed to their plan. When the trial took place that July, Scopes, who may not have in fact taught evolution, never took the stand. He was utterly overshadowed by the legal titans contending in the
Rhea County Courthouse and outside on the lawn, where defense attorney Clarence Darrow made a fool of Bryan. Scopes was convicted, and the Butler Act was upheld. But Darrow’s ruthless cross-examination of Bryan, broadcast on WGN radio, delivered the real victory to the evolutionary side. Science defeated religion. Ridiculed to great effect by acerbic journalist H. L. Mencken, the fundamentalists retreated and did not reemerge in American politics until the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1980s and ’90s.

In a limited sense, this story is true. Yet it is profoundly misleading. Based on the myth that Christian fundamentalists walked away from politics for decades after the Scopes trial, our thumbnail sketch neglects a continuous pattern of Christian conservative political activism from the 1920s through the 1970s. And it misses the true origin story of this activism by misconstruing the historical context of Dayton, Tennessee, itself and its best-known temporary resident, John Thomas Scopes. Dayton was neither sleepy nor isolated. Scopes was far from a passive, politically naïve victim of the trial. Both were tied to wider currents of radical labor and socialist activism, the explosive impact of industrial capitalism, and deep moral questions about the direction of American society at the turn of the twentieth century. Seeing Scopes and Dayton in this light points to the central theme of this book—the deployment of anticommunist arguments by creationists from the Scopes trial to the present. At stake at the “Monkey Trial” were not only rival perspectives on natural history and the Bible, but conflicting politicized moral visions about how American society could and should evolve. The real story of Dayton and the Scopes family reveals a century-long explosive historical matrix that meshes with what I have called, following creationist George McCready Price, “Red Dynamite.”

We begin thirty-four years before the “trial of the century.” In the autumn of 1891, six hundred residents of Dayton, Tennessee, signed a petition to a special session of the state legislature. Speaking in the name of “miners, merchants, and citizens of all classes,” the petition denounced Tennessee’s convict lease system. After the end of the Civil War, the state of Tennessee had authorized coal mining companies to pay the state a fee in return for employing convicts in state prisons and paying them nothing. Labor activists viewed this system as a way for coal mine owners to
lower wages, incite racial animosity between workers, and thereby un­
dermine the power of labor unions. Just months earlier, three hundred armed coal miners in Briceville in nearby Anderson County had marched to the stockade that housed convict laborers brought in as strikebreakers at a local mine. They disarmed the mine guards and liberated the largely African American convicts. The Briceville action proved to be just one skirmish in an extended rebellion in 1891–92 by East and Central Tennes­see coal miners against convict lease. Miners, including Blacks, engaged in peaceful lobbying, union-organized protest meetings, strikes, and dis­ciplined armed actions to free convict laborers in 1891. The next year, miners fought in bloody battles against state militiamen, with a num­ber killed on both sides. Warning of “dark and dire disaster” in Dayton if mine owners dared to import convict laborers there as well, the peti­tion signatories begged state legislators to abolish convict lease so that there would be no “re-occurrence of trouble witnessed at our sister town of Briceville.”

As they demanded relief from lawmakers, the Dayton petitioner were careful to stress that their protest had respectable goals. Convict lease threatened to undermine the ability of working people to be responsible property owners with a stake in the community. After all, they explained, “1,000 miners have provided for themselves little houses and have paid for them by honest toil.” If mine owners could employ convicts for practically nothing, then free wage earners would be in deep trouble, and who knows then what might happen. Daytonians knew that coal mining rebels would be demonized. After militia members were killed in action the following summer in Coal Creek, next door to Briceville, the editors of the Knoxville Journal denounced the rebels as “outlaws” and proclaimed that the “agitator, the anarchist” would be crushed. They favorably quoted a militia officer who described Coal Creek as “the place where the torch of the anarchist and communist lights the darkness of the mountain.”

Dayton mine owners chose not to take their chances with convict labor. Their reluctance may have sprung from the paternalistic inclinations of the outside investors who turned Dayton into an industrial boom town. Attracted to the Cumberland Plateau’s vast iron ore, coal, and limestone deposits and newly built railroads, all in close proximity to the Tennessee River, English capitalists led by Titus Salt & Sons bought up twenty-five
thousand acres of land, paid for mineral rights, and established the Dayton Coal and Iron Company (DCI) in 1884. A textile magnate who developed an English model community called Saltaire, Sir Titus Salt Sr. (1803–1876) fancied himself a true Christian humanitarian. Salt provided housing and plentiful cultural amenities for his textile workers, though he opposed labor unions and was alarmed at the “physical force” branch of the British Chartist movement fighting for working-class political rights. As Salt acquired land in Tennessee, he likely hoped that his American project would reflect those same philanthropic intentions and produce industrial tranquility. Now led by his son Titus Salt Jr. (1843–1887), Salt’s company built hundreds of homes for Dayton’s burgeoning workforce and a two-story brick company store to supply their needs. By 1890, the tiny community of Smith’s Crossroads (population 250) had become a bustling industrial

Figure 1. Dayton Coal and Iron facilities, c. 1915, Dayton, Tennessee. Sitting idle by the time of the 1925 Scopes “Monkey Trial,” the company’s bustling coal mines, coke ovens, and blast furnaces (shown here at the base of the smokestacks) powered an industrial boom that featured intense local labor battles and violent conflict in East Tennessee over the convict lease system. Courtesy of Brewer Collection, Rhea County Historical and Genealogical Society.
town of 5,000. In the hills around Dayton, miners dynamited and then shoveled coal to feed coke ovens dotting the landscape, fueling giant blast furnaces that smelted ore into pig iron, an essential ingredient for making steel. Hotels and factories followed, along with the city’s first elementary school in 1895. It later became famous, and infamous, as Rhea County Central High School, where football coach and science teacher John Scopes allegedly taught evolution to his students.5

Dayton had arrived, but it was hardly a sleepy oasis of industrial peace. Quite the opposite. In the wee hours of Friday, October 16, 1896, a gigantic explosion threw slumbering Daytonians from their beds. According to police, a suspected incendiary had set a match to five fifty-pound cases of dynamite at the DCI warehouse, blowing the building “to atoms,” sending “brick bats” everywhere, wrecking the Cincinnati Southern railroad station, and shattering windows all over town. Three years later, the facilities were once again destroyed, this time during a coal mining strike. Company officials accused striking miners of setting the power plant on fire, which reduced the company’s entire aboveground facilities to a “mass of ruins.”

Whether or not Rhea County coal miners were responsible, they were a strike-prone bunch. For all of Titus Salt’s fine intentions, Dayton Coal and Iron was forced to compete with other producers and lower costs wherever possible. Salt’s managers routinely cut tonnage rates (miners were paid by the weight of coal mined) or docked miners’ pay for “excessive” amounts of slate in their coal when the market for iron was weak. The company also irked miners by paying them in “scrip,” forcing them to shop at the company store, until protests ended the practice. All in all, the result was a seemingly endless string of walkouts; miners struck in 1897, 1898, 1899, 1903, and 1904. In that latter year miners organized Local 1117 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in Dayton. In an attempt to cripple the 1904 strike, Dayton Coal and Iron sought an injunction from the district federal court in Chattanooga against local UMWA leaders. In the eyes of the company owners, since they sold pig iron across state lines to steel companies, the walkout interfered with interstate commerce. Dayton Coal and Iron accused the union men of violent attacks against nonunion miners: they allegedly had dynamited a nonunion miner’s house, fired shots into a trainload of nonunion miners, and threatened the local sheriff with his life.6
The intensity of these conflicts may have reflected the deadly risks that Rhea County shared with miners everywhere. The decade leading to the 1904 strike was spectacularly bad for Dayton. In 1895, five days before Christmas, miners arrived for work at the DCI’s Nelson mine. Located two miles west of the city up on Walden Ridge, the “slope” mine tunneled on a gradual downward incline, snaked two miles into the mountain, and employed over one hundred men. Known as a “gassy” mine, Nelson held so much methane (called “firedamp” by the miners) that it bubbled up through nearby Richland Creek, which periodically caught fire. That day, the mine received its regular early morning inspection, but as several dozen miners walked down one of the main alleyways (“entries”) to their working “rooms,” a gigantic explosion occurred. Flame shot throughout the one-mile entry, fueled by firedamp and coal dust, and then spread to other entries. The shock of the explosion brought down tons of slate and killed twenty-nine men. Dayton was “convulsed in horror and grief,” wrote a reporter for the Chattanooga Times. The “shrieks of bereaved wives and mothers” rang throughout the town. The disaster, the reporter concluded, “stands without a parallel in all its horrible details in the mining history of Tennessee.” Two parallels were yet to come. In 1901, a gas explosion at DCI’s Richland mine killed twenty-one miners. The next year, the Nelson mine once again became a death trap. A gas explosion killed twenty-two. Unlike the 1895 disaster, in which responsibility fell to “nature” for the deaths of twenty-nine men, the 1901 and 1902 blasts led to a spate of lawsuits against DCI. Taken together, according to one press report, these cases represented “one of the most stubbornly fought legal battles in the court annals of Rhea County.”

Among the Dayton dead in 1895 and 1902 were free African American miners. The racialized politics of post–Civil War Tennessee had powerfully shaped the convict lease system. African Americans were disproportionately arrested, convicted, and then leased out to coal mining companies. It could seem easy for white Tennessee miners to conflate black skin with a threat to their livelihood even if their Black coworkers were free men. In the early days of DCI, when Dayton miners came to the company office to pick up their pay, the waiting room leading to the company store had both “white” and “colored” sections. But a growing number of free African American miners in East Tennessee sunk roots in their communities, belonged to the fledgling mine workers’ unions, which preached racial
equality in the name of working-class solidarity, and took part in battles to end convict lease. Thus, in the early 1890s, William Riley, elected and then reelected secretary-treasurer of District 19 of the UMWA (covering East Tennessee and southern Kentucky), was an African American miner and preacher. For all of its contradictions and limitations, the East Tennessee coal mining region surrounding Dayton in the late nineteenth century could be a surprisingly progressive place.

In 1885, the year that Dayton appeared on the Tennessee map, a young progressive-minded English-born apprentice machinist named Thomas Scopes, father of future accused evolutionist John Scopes, arrived in the United States. Born into a working-class London family in 1860, Scopes was literate and a freethinker. When he walked off the ship in New York, he carried with him four books: the Bible, a hymnal, a volume on the French Revolution, and *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. The young Scopes worked his way across the US in waterfront towns from Philadelphia to Galveston, Texas, and then to Union City, Tennessee. In Union City he met his future wife, Mary Alva Brown. Her Kentucky family roots included a tobacco farmer who helped Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest, and a Cumberland Presbyterian preacher. The new couple moved to Mound City, Illinois, where Scopes applied his skills to the booming railroads. In 1894, during the nationwide Pullman strike led by Eugene Debs and his newly created American Railway Union (ARU), Scopes was working as a roundhouse foreman. Like Sir Titus Salt, Illinois railroad car manufacturer George Pullman had created a company town that aimed to keep his workers—whom he called his “children”—content but under his thumb. When the Panic of 1893 sent the American economy into a tailspin, Pullman cut wages but not rents. His workers rebelled, and railroaders far and wide stopped work in sympathy. Their action set the stage for a major confrontation, as Pullman obtained a federal injunction, granted by the Democratic Grover Cleveland administration against Debs and the ARU. Sitting in a federal prison, disillusioned with what seemed like a sham of American democracy, Debs advanced down a path toward socialist politics.

Ordered by his boss to take the trains out and serve as a Pullman strikebreaker, Thomas Scopes refused and was fired. Shortly thereafter, he joined the International Association of Machinists (IAM), and following the lead
of Eugene Debs, who became his lifelong hero, Scopes also became a socialist. Moving next to the Ohio River town of Paducah, Kentucky, where John Scopes was born in 1900, Thomas Scopes worked for Illinois Central Railroad as a roundhouse foreman. He ran the local lodge of the IAM and campaigned for a socialist “cooperative commonwealth.” He ran for city judge in 1901 on the Socialist Party ticket and served as a presidential elector for the Socialist Labor Party in 1904. When Eugene Debs came to Paducah in 1910 and spoke to an audience of three thousand, Scopes introduced him from the stage.

Reflecting decades later on the forces that led him to challenge Tennessee’s Butler Act, son John Thomas Scopes, known by his family as JT, could not help thinking of the example set by his mother and father. His parents, Scopes wrote, created “a tolerant environment that taught me early in life to revere truth and love and courage.” But the influence of Thomas Scopes loomed especially large on the young JT’s thinking. “Dad taught me always to stand up for what I thought was right,” Scopes wrote. Beyond this affirmation of free thought, Thomas Scopes conveyed more specific lessons. When America entered World War I, young Scopes was nearly draft age, and the family had relocated across the Ohio River to Salem, Illinois. “I want you to understand this much, J.T.,” said his antiwar Socialist father. “This war is none of your business. It is strictly a fight . . . for control of the world commercial markets. . . . This is nothing but an all-out economic struggle into which they’re trying to drag every last workingman of Europe and America.”

Thomas Scopes also shaped John’s critical perspective on Christianity. Once an elder in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Paducah, Thomas Scopes left because he disagreed with the church’s “holier-than-thou” approach to prostitutes working the river town’s red-light district. Opposing efforts to ban them or to kick them out of town, Thomas Scopes thought they needed good-paying jobs, not lectures. “I believed, as Dad did, that economics was the most important factor in a person’s well-being,” John Scopes recalled. “For a society to be righteous, it must cherish and work for economic justice first of all.” Thus the teenage Scopes learned from his father to accept the moral teachings of Jesus, minus “the myths and miracles of Christian dogma.”

Dad also got his son a summer job. After JT finished Salem High School in the spring of 1919, with none other than native son William
Jennings Bryan as commencement speaker, he joined Thomas Scopes in the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad roundhouse, shoveling coal into boilers for the summer. Given that 1919 saw four million workers go on strike across the US, in the politically explosive aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, one imagines that the Socialist railroad machinist and his son had plenty to talk about.

By 1913, most Dayton miners had stopped shoveling coal. The big steel companies found a cheaper supply of pig iron. DCI’s plant and technology were growing obsolete. Sir Titus Salt’s successors in London and Glasgow were growing desperate. When it became clear that their investment, which looked so promising in the 1880s, was now going bust, London-based company president Peter Donaldson took his own life by driving his motorcar into the Thames River. Over the next twelve years, a procession of investors tried and failed to make DCI’s mines, coke ovens, blast furnaces, foundries, and quarries turn a profit. By 1925, the mines now owned by Cumberland Coal and Iron were deserted, full of water, and unguarded aside from some barbed-wire fences.

Shortly after newly arrived Daytonian John Thomas Scopes agreed to serve as a test case of the antievolution Butler Act, he traveled back home in early summer to visit family and talk strategy with his father. Thomas Scopes was proud his son was standing up for his beliefs—“freedom of religion, freedom to teach, freedom to think and to believe.” The elder Scopes identified so much with his son’s case, in fact, that “he considered the trial to just as much be his as mine.” JT clearly valued his father’s advice. And so, now as a retired railroad machinist with some time on his hands, Thomas Scopes followed JT back to Dayton and stayed in a local hotel for the entire course of the trial. On at least one of those hot July days in 1925, a news photographer captured father and son in deep conversation during a break from the trial. Many years later his obituary in the New York Times described John Scopes as a “shy, clean-cut, young man who never uttered a word at the trial” and was “clearly overwhelmed in the carnival-like circumstances under which it was held.”

The photo suggests a man fully engaged in the moment and in control. After all, when JT graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1924, with a minor in geology, his bachelor’s degree was in law.

John Scopes’s legal battle was also an occasion for Thomas Scopes to see old friends. As JT recalled, one of these was E. Haldeman-Julius of Girard,
Kansas, a “good friend” of his father whom the younger Scopes had once met in Paducah. A quirky socialist writer and editor hailing from an immigrant working-class Jewish family in Brooklyn, Haldeman-Julius served during these years as editor of *Appeal to Reason*, the best-known socialist newsweekly. He was notorious for promoting advanced but scandalous
ideas about sex and marriage—Julius hyphenated his last name when he married Marcet Haldeman. And he pioneered a series of five-by-three-and-a-half-inch “Little Blue Books” whose millions of sales at twenty-five cents a copy paved the way for the rise of the modern paperback.

In the year before John Scopes went on trial, Haldeman-Julius published *Darwin and the Theory of Evolution* (also known as *Little Blue Book No. 568*) by Carroll Lane Fenton (1900–1969). A budding geologist and paleontologist with a journalistic bent, Fenton would receive his PhD in geology from the University of Chicago in 1926, just months before John Scopes arrived there post-trial, fully funded by his supporters, to pursue his own graduate geological studies. Haldeman-Julius enlisted Fenton because he not only ably summarized Darwin but also did battle with the antievolutionists. Decrying their “willful ignorance and distortion of facts,” Fenton noted that they attributed various social and political evils to Darwin, including Bolshevism and “weakening morals.”

Though Fenton ridiculed this claim, Haldeman-Julius provided fuel for the creationist fire in his own *Studies in Rationalism*, published in 1925. In this blistering series of atheist essays, Haldeman-Julius raised the hackles of Christian fundamentalists when he asked, “Is Religion the Necessary Basis of Morality?” Haldeman-Julius argued instead that morality had a “material basis” that enabled human society to evolve upward. One illustration of the positive “evolution of society,” in the author’s eyes, was “feminism triumphant.” Haldeman-Julius celebrated the erosion of Christian social taboos related to sex, including for women. Sex was no longer shameful; it could now assume its “wholesome, natural, joyous place.” And women would be “companions of man in moral freedom and equality.” Evolution was not just about fossils and finches. Morality could evolve, too.

The economic and moral battle waged by working people against the leasing of convicts to coal mining companies in Tennessee was almost surely common knowledge to both Scopes and Haldeman-Julius. Not only was it a big news story around the nation and a subject of ongoing attention in the labor movement, but Eugene Debs addressed what he called the “Tennessee tragedy” in the pages of *Appeal to Reason*. In a widely reprinted 1899 speech, Debs explained that convict lease was an injustice to both the convicts and all those who toiled in the coal mines: “the
convicts, themselves brutally treated, were used as a means of dragging the whole mine-working class down to their crime-cursed condition.” Debs also paid tribute to the willingness of East Tennessee miners to rebel. Once they took up arms, he noted, politicians changed their laws “in a twinkling,” and hundreds of convict miners were set free. As Debs also observed, however, Tennessee ended convict lease without ending convict labor. It built a state-run coal mine employing convicts that would operate for decades.26

As the trial of John Scopes approached in early July 1925, it was almost inevitable that someone out there would connect the dots: John Scopes, Thomas Scopes, Socialist, freethinker, friendly with militant atheists, sexual immorality. Clean-cut? Hardly. Indeed, July 10, the opening day of the trial, newspaper readers in Chattanooga got the dirt on the defendant’s family. Thomas Scopes had left the Presbyterian Church and become a devoted Socialist. The elder Scopes often spoke against “the religious and political systems of America” and with his wife raised young John in “an unchristian and socialistic environment.” There was more. George Rappleyea, the mine manager who worked with John Scopes to bring about a test case of the Butler Act, was a member of the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU conspired with the communists and aimed to bring about a violent general strike that would overthrow the American government. That secret and unsavory agenda explained why ACLU attorneys had partnered with Clarence Darrow, known for his defense of left-wing radicals, and socialist Dudley Field Malone, whose high-profile divorce had scandalized the Catholic Church. In the eyes of Rev. Timothy W. Callaway, who provided this revelatory material to the Chattanooga Times, the challenge to the Butler Act posed by John Scopes was not just a secular, legal slap at Christian theology.27 It was part and parcel of a broad-based, immoral, and communistic attack on American institutions.

Ten days later, as if to validate Callaway’s conspiratorial suspicions, John Scopes wrote his own news story published in the Daily Worker, the newspaper of the fledgling American Communist Party. Scopes wrote that he was not surprised the jury found him guilty, but looked forward to winning the case on appeal.28 Scopes was no Communist, but the early American communists, like their socialist predecessors, joined Scopes in a
fervent defense of evolutionary science. They ran numerous articles on the trial and took great pains to explain to revolutionary workers what was at stake in the “trial of the century.”

The violent, conflicted, rich international industrial history of Dayton, Tennessee. The very real and hidden labor and socialist history of the Scopes family. The red-baiting of John Scopes. The appearance of an article by Scopes in a communist publication. All these point to an important untold story: how antievolutionists throughout the twentieth century mobilized their followers by linking evolution, communism, and immorality. Labeled “Red Dynamite” by the pioneering creationist geologist George McCready Price just months after the Scopes trial, this potent political mix helps to answer a question still nagging at us today: Why has creationism persisted into the twenty-first century in the most scientifically advanced country in the world? The commonsense answer revolves around the strength of American religious belief. Creationists contend that evolution undermines the authority of the Bible, a dynamic reflected in our understanding of the Scopes trial as a battle between science and religion. This book advances a different explanation for why and how Christian conservatives have succeeded in demonizing Darwin: they convinced their followers that evolutionary thought promotes immoral social, sexual, and political behavior, undermining existing God-given standards and hierarchies of power.

While “scientific” creationists have trumpeted the intellectual inadequacy of biological evolutionary theory and the superiority of a Bible-based model, their real concern is not exclusively scientific or religious. What alarms them is the concept of social evolution. If moral standards can change over time, as E. Haldeman-Julius freely acknowledged, then “man” and not God becomes the ultimate authority, and “anything goes,” a phrase with both violent and sexual overtones. Since the Marxist founders, Russian Bolsheviks, and their American socialist and Communist successors joined their promotion of an ever-changing class-based standard of morality to their embrace of Darwin’s discovery, they drew regular fire from creationists. From this standpoint, the stakes in the battle against evolutionary science could not be bigger. The fundamental issues are not biological but social. The ultimate question is not, narrowly speaking,
religious, but political: Whose morality will prevail during our time on this earth? As maverick Christian evangelist Francis Schaeffer titled his bestselling book, *How Should We Then Live?* (1976).

For George McCready Price and his creationist successors, evolutionary science not only raised questions about the central theological, otherworldly question of salvation—whether Christian believers have access to eternal life and death—but also generated deep concern about its this-worldly social and political repercussions, or what Jesus called the “evil fruits” of a “corrupt tree” in his Sermon on the Mount: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.”

Unlike the other two standard creationist mantras—evolution is “bad science,” and it contradicts the book of Genesis—the “fruits” argument has a unique ability to speak to the mundane struggles of ordinary Christian believers. Instead of paying attention to complex critiques of evolutionary science or detailed analysis of biblical texts, Christians need only know that if we teach people they are descended from animals, they will act like animals. Recent “evil fruits” that creationists attribute to the “corrupt tree” of evolution include school shootings, gay marriage, and abortion. This moral consequentialist political logic can be neatly summed up by the title of an influential conservative manifesto authored by Richard Weaver some eighty years ago and still invoked by creationists today: *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948). *Red Dynamite* highlights a key part of that creationist mobilizing strategy: the argument that socialism and communism, along with their alleged allied immoralities—centered on sex and death—are among the “evil fruits” produced by evolutionary thinking.

These arguments had a populist flavor. They told ordinary Christian believers that they did not need to know any arcane details of biology to judge the validity of evolutionary ideas. Simply apply the “fruit test.” If evolution and its “culture of death” had spurred Stalin to kill millions, then regardless of any evidence about the merits of evolutionary science, it must be invalid. As one creationist skeptically asked, “What appreciation of the truth has emerged in the mind of the common man from all this profound probing into rocks and fossils, into the anatomy of the ape?”
The degree to which such arguments avoided any need to judge an idea based on scientific evidence was striking. What mattered was the practical effect of evolutionary concepts. Given creationists’ long-standing hostility to John Dewey and “progressive education”—which some also drew into the anticommunist net—it is ironic that they lent support to an essentially pragmatic idea.\textsuperscript{35}

Even while Red Dynamite creationist thinkers focused on the here and now, they did not lose sight of the Christian theological stakes: evolution and its atheistic and communist associations were often linked to Satan, the ultimate false prophet—the great tempter and deceiver.\textsuperscript{36} The focus on deception amplified the impact of conspiratorial claims in which people were not who they seemed to be. The false prophet argument dovetailed with the end-times theology of premillennial dispensationalism, in which an attractive, convincing, compelling leader turns out to be the Antichrist.\textsuperscript{37} If evolution could be linked to Satan—a claim made repeatedly by Henry Morris, the founder of post–World War II “scientific” creationism—then Christians must stop it at any cost.

Over the last century, historians have enriched our understanding of the antievolutionary impulse in a variety of ways but have tended to ignore or neglect its anticommunist dimension.\textsuperscript{38} Yet creationist anticommunists correctly saw that evolution and communism were allies. To take one surprising example, *Evolution: A Journal of Nature*, the first popular monthly magazine in the United States to promote the cause of evolutionary science, was founded and edited during the 1920s by a central leader of the US Communist Party.\textsuperscript{39} The historian Richard Hofstadter taught generations that the primary “social Darwinists” were conservative, individualistic robber barons, obsessed with “survival of the fittest.” Yet left-wing “social Darwinism,” with an emphasis on the collective good, was just as real.\textsuperscript{40} And despite the disastrous experiments of the Soviet agronomist Trofim Lysenko, who championed Lamarck’s theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics over Darwin’s emphasis on natural selection, “Marxist-Darwinism” was the framework in which Soviet science developed in the 1920s, at the same time that evolution disappeared from American biology classrooms and textbooks.\textsuperscript{41}

The difficulty that academics have in taking creationists seriously stems from yet another one of Richard Hofstadter’s influential intellectual
creations—the “paranoid style in American politics.” Prompted by the 1964 Republican Party presidential race, Hofstadter was reacting mainly to “extreme right-wingers” such as members of the conspiracy-minded John Birch Society, who were stumping for Barry Goldwater. Their “paranoid style” featured “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” Such thinkers claimed not only that there were isolated conspiracies, but that they formed the “motive force” of history. Conspirators embodied “demonic forces of almost transcendent power.”

While Hofstadter has been rightly criticized for dismissing conspiracy theorizing as an ill-defined mental illness, his description of conspirators as nearly omnipotent is helpful in underlining the essential continuity of conspiracy theorizing with religion. Conspirators, whether communists or capitalists, seem to have supernatural command over events. Speaking of communists, this point helps explain why Marxists are not conspiracy theorists: while they recognize the immense power wielded by ruling wealthy classes (who sometimes meet and plot in secret), they also argue that working people have tremendous power, at least in potential form.

In a number of respects, creationist anticommunism does seem to perfectly embody the conspiratorial “paranoid style.” A number of antievolutionist crusaders pinned Darwinism on the Illuminati. They made plentiful use of the fabricated Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which blamed a Jewish plot for evolutionary science. And creationists regularly adopted anticommunist language that Hofstadter described as “apocalyptic and absolutistic.” Such rhetoric may well have led evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to write these unfortunate words some thirty years ago: “It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I’d rather not consider that).”

But Dawkins and like-minded secular Americans dismiss creationist conspiracism far too easily. If creationist anticommunists tended to exaggerate the degree to which communists were lurking behind every corner and secretly directing events, there was a kernel of truth in the idea. To paraphrase Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, just because you are a “paranoid” creationist does not mean that they are not organizing against you. Not only did socialists and communists promote evolutionary science (both
natural and social), but they were also in the forefront, at critical moments, of campaigns for women’s political and reproductive rights, the African American freedom struggle, the battle to establish industrial unionism through the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and ’40s, innovations in sex education, and the gay rights movement. They gravitated toward these movements not because they were Satan’s minions, but because they had a vision of forging a united working class that surmounted divisions based on gender, race, nationality, skill, and sexual orientation. In this regard, the “culture war” issues that are often considered to be separate from class conflicts are inextricably bound up with them.46

Without propounding a conspiratorial viewpoint, historians have increasingly recognized the key roles played by a variety of left-wing radicals in twentieth-century nonrevolutionary social movements. They include, for example, Betty Friedan, the central founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), whose labor activism in Communist Party circles in the 1940s was crucial to her postwar feminist vision. Earlier generations of socialist feminists included birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger, who was inspired in part by Darwin’s writings to challenge traditional women’s roles. This does not mean that abortion is a communist evolutionary “plot.” But the history of birth control cannot be fully understood without the role played by “reform Darwinist” socialist feminists.47 Exaggeration, elevated suspiciousness, fantasy—all of these did characterize those preaching and writing about evolutionist and communist conspirators. Nevertheless, those in the creationist conspiratorial camp were expressing in a distorted form the real social, political, and economic conflicts that swirled around them.48 This dynamic is no less true of recent rounds of conspiracy mongering, from anti-Obama birtherism to pro- Trump QAnon.49

As a metaphor explaining the creationist anticommunist tradition, dynamite is remarkably apt. For this we can thank Swedish inventor, chemist, and engineer Alfred Nobel, who lodged his new explosive squarely in evolutionary history. The key ingredient Nobel added to nitroglycerine to make the compound stable was diatomaceous earth, a sedimentary deposit made up of fossilized diatoms, a single-celled aquatic algae that
evolutionary geologists date as far back as the Jurassic period. Nobel also had a way with words. Patenting the new concoction in 1867, Nobel coined his world-famous neologism based on the Greek δύναμις (dynamis), usually translated as “power,” a word that can mean a force for good or for evil. This internally contradictory word perfectly conveys the struggle over morality and power that creationism expressed. Dynamite means mortal danger. It arouses an unreasoning, primeval fear. It poses a lethal threat that justifies any means of escape or resistance, as the Nelson and Richland miners knew all too well. The repeated denunciations of evolution and its baleful effects did tend to have an all-or-nothing quality, a sense that at stake was nothing less than the existence of human civilization. Paradoxically, dynamite also can mean exactly the opposite—“terrific,” “wonderful,” and “impressive.” Not for nothing did a string of conservative Christian preachers who denounced evolution in the strongest terms also boast that their own sermons were “dynamite.” While George McCready Price never explicitly connected the explosive power of dynamite with the human orgasm, the metaphor also inevitably resonates with sex. In so many ways, the anxieties raised by the teaching of evolution—whether they revolved around “free love,” fluid gender roles, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, racial mixing, dancing, or petting parties—came down to fear of the power of sexual arousal to disrupt the established social order. Fundamentalist preacher and Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell captured this duality when he warned about evolution-induced “sexual anarchy” in the nation’s schools.

The “red” half of the equation is similarly multivalent. In Price’s era and for decades thereafter, “red” signified communists and socialists, workers in revolt against the capitalist order. Depending on one’s political sympathies, red could be a badge of revolutionary honor or a mark of shame, and in the eyes of the dominant thread of Christian premillennialism, a “mark of the beast.” As the original basis of the choice of color for the flag of revolt, red also meant blood sacrificed in a righteous cause and—as any fan of the musical version of Les Misérables knows—a measure of the dedication of its determined defenders. In the eyes of antievolutionists, it could connote the massive volume of blood spilled by evolution-induced mass murder in the twentieth century. For those who
stood opposed to “Darwinism,” sex and death fairly well sum up the supposed effects of teaching evolution to the nation’s youth.

While I have uncovered plentiful evidence of Red Dynamite creationist politics, both scientific creationists and conservative evangelicals have consistently downplayed their political aims. Each group had distinctive reasons for doing so. Henry Morris and his counterparts at the Institute for Creation Research sought to reinforce their standing as “real” scientists, who presumably abjured the rough-and-tumble of the political world. Fundamentalist ministers of the Christian gospel attempted to uphold Jesus’s injunction not to mix religion and politics: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”\(^{55}\) That distinction can be notoriously difficult to define. As Jerry Falwell wrote in 1979, “homosexuality, abortion, pornography are not political issues, they are moral issues that have become political.”\(^{56}\) Contrary to Falwell’s claim, my book proceeds on the contention that religion and politics—in the broadest sense—have always been inextricably intertwined.\(^{57}\) In that respect, it builds on a scholarly foundation laid by historians Darren Dochuk, Matthew Avery Sutton, Dan Williams, Molly Worthen, and others, who have placed conservative Christian ideas, cultural commitments, and political activism firmly within a rich framework of social and political history.\(^{58}\) As Sutton writes in regard to the mythical, multidecade flight of fundamentalists from the political arena after the Scopes trial, “They never retreated.”\(^{59}\)

Creationists’ repeated denials of political activism are remarkably similar to recent claims by “denialists” of a different kind: anticommunist climate-change-denying scientists and their allies. In *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2010), Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway show how a handful of scientist activists were the key players behind campaigns to stop government action to reduce smoking, address a thinning ozone layer, and combat the effects of climate change. A superficial reading of these scientists’ writings suggests that they were simply combating “bad science.” But they were motivated, above all, by a “free-market fundamentalism” that expressed deep hostility to government regulation of the economy. In opposing action on climate change, the denialists
ridiculed environmentalists as secret socialist “watermelons”—green on the outside and red on the inside. While the history of the COVID-19 pandemic remains to be written, it would be hard to deny that conflicts over virus lethality, the wisdom of mask wearing, and testing data are not about science in any strict sense but rather rest on opposed political worldviews with deep historical roots.

To reconstruct the century-long history of Red Dynamite politics, it is essential to begin by documenting the pre–Scopes trial reality of socialist and communist pro-evolutionism, which is the subject of chapter 1. Chapter 2 charts the early Christian evangelical response by centering on creationist geologist George McCready Price, a Seventh-day Adventist whose faith tradition uniquely encouraged a young-earth perspective and who began tying together the evils of socialism and evolution early in the twentieth century. In chapter 3 we follow the organizing activities during the 1920s of prominent creationists such as William Bell Riley, Gerald Winrod, J. Frank Norris, Mordecai Ham (who converted Billy Graham and preached that evolution was the result of a Jewish-Communist world conspiracy), and Catholic creationist George Barry O’Toole. In chapter 4, Christian anticommunism unfolds in a context highlighted by widespread labor struggle, political polarization, and the rise of Fascism on a global scale. Riley and Winrod both embraced the authority of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which explains that Jews are responsible for both Marxism and Darwinism. In the early years of the Cold War as narrated in chapter 5, conservative Christian leadership passed to a new generation who prominently included Baptist firebrand preacher John R. Rice. In the early 1960s, an organized antievolution movement reemerged under the leadership of “scientific” creationist Henry M. Morris, coauthor with John C. Whitcomb Jr. of the young-earth blockbuster The Genesis Flood (1961). Chapter 6 traces the continuation and transformation of the Red Dynamite theme in the writings of Morris and his allies in the Creation Research Society. In chapter 7, I bring the story through the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Chapter 8 traces echoes of the Red Dynamite theme into the twenty-first century.

The political connotation of the word “red” has been transformed into its opposite since George McCready Price coined his phrase nearly a century ago. Young people today associate “red” with the Republican Party,
not communism. And yet, that political symbolism continues to evolve in surprising ways. When public school teachers launched a powerful wave of strikes in the spring of 2018, they wore red T-shirts. Teachers proudly proclaimed that they were “Red for Ed,” drawing on labor movement traditions and calling attention to the sad state of state education budgets. The shift in the political meaning of the color red may seem unrelated to the decades of political conflict unleashed at the Scopes trial, but it is a telling example of social evolution, which gets to the crux of the matter. The controversy over evolutionary science has never been primarily about science or religion, in a narrow sense, but about morality and power. Who will rule society and on what moral basis? Viewed in this light, the ongoing tensions over teaching Darwin and his ideas as they have evolved over 150 years are inseparable from the broader social and political conflicts of today. Not until those conflicts are resolved will we stop arguing about evolution.