

An attack on science: Smithsonian Institution to show film on Intelligent Design

Walter Gilberti, Joseph Kay
20 June 2005

On June 23, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., is scheduled to show a documentary, "The Privileged Planet," put out by the Discovery Institute. The Seattle-based Discovery Institute is the country's most prominent advocacy group for the "theory" of Intelligent Design, a quasi-religious teaching that seeks to undermine the science of evolution.

The Smithsonian is a government-funded institution and one of the most prestigious museum systems in the country. Its decision to show the film has the effect of lending the anti-scientific views of the Discovery Institute a legitimacy of which they are completely undeserving. The film's showing is part of an ongoing attack on scientific thought in the United States, an attack that has been spearheaded by Christian fundamentalist groups closely allied with the Bush administration.

The basic argument of the Intelligent Design advocates is that the structure of the universe, the position of the earth the solar system, the intricate workings of life—all of this is just too "perfect" to be the result of anything but an intelligent creator. This extremely old argument for the existence of God has been dressed up in modern garb to make it appear scientific. In essence, it is simply a rehash of views that are completely antithetical to the scientific outlook, which insists that everything is explicable in terms of the natural laws of material development.

The National Museum of Natural History is noted for showcasing its substantial collection of fossil organisms, as well as its displays elaborating the workings of the process of Darwinian evolution. But according to Discovery Institute president Bruce Chapman, the Smithsonian is "warming up" to the theory of intelligent design.

After it came under some criticism for deciding to show the film, the Smithsonian eventually gave back the \$16,000 fee charged to the Discovery Institute. However, it did not cancel the event, even though the museum's stated policy is to prohibit the showing of any material of a religious or political nature. The Discovery Institute was so delighted by the Smithsonian's sudden and unexpected pliability on this matter that it is claiming that the museum is co-sponsoring the event, something the Smithsonian vigorously denies.

Why would the Smithsonian Institution in any way associate

itself with an organization that declares anathema against any explanations of social or natural phenomena except those that resort, ultimately, to God's will? There can be no doubt that the institution's managers were aware of the views of the Discovery Institute, which is one of the most prominent opponents of Darwinian evolution.

There were certainly many ideological forces affecting the decision by the museum's management, but it is also important to point out that the Smithsonian is a government institution with close ties to corporate establishment. It includes on its Board of Regents, among others, Vice President Dick Cheney, Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist. While it is unlikely that any of these figures played a direct role in the decision to show the film, the dependence of the museum on the government subjects it directly to the pressures of the administration and the political establishment as a whole.

This was not the first incident in which the Smithsonian has helped give legitimacy to the Intelligent Design advocates. Months earlier, another event, one that also involved the National Museum, is still causing tremors at the institution. The incident involves the continuing saga of Richard Sternberg, a National Museum researcher and the former editor of *The Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, a journal with a loose association to the Smithsonian. In the August 2004 issue of the journal, an article appeared entitled "The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories," by Stephen C. Meyer, who is a fellow at the Discovery Institute.

In the article, which, according to Sternberg, was peer reviewed by three scientists whose names have not been released, Meyer attempts to make a case for intelligent design in the usual creationist manner. Any gap in the fossil record—for example, that which supposedly exists between the Precambrian and the Cambrian, a period that witnessed an explosive evolution of hard-bodied animals that left ample fossil remains—is presented as "evidence" for the workings of something other than the self-movement of matter.

There is nothing new in this regard. Theological interpretations of natural phenomena have for centuries attempted to insert themselves into the interstices between what

is known and what is not yet known. As it turns out, in the case of the above cited example of the Cambrian, there is a growing fossil record of Precambrian organisms including clearly transitional forms, as discussed in the article “Solution to Darwin’s dilemma: Discovery of the missing Precambrian record of life,” by UCLA professor and research scientist J. William Schopf.

What *is* new is the degree to which a particularly retrograde form of religious backwardness has covertly inserted itself into the “scientific community,” creating an atmosphere of fear and confusion that is sure to have a chilling effect on both scientific discourse and research.

Sternberg has since resigned as editor of the journal, but has filed a complaint with the Office of Special Council, claiming harassment and religious discrimination by the Smithsonian. On the Internet, web sites abound proclaiming Sternberg a victim of a McCarthyite-style witch hunt by the Institution. Yet, it is not surprising that Sternberg would be shunned by any scientist with an ounce of integrity and theoretical acumen.

Whether Sternberg, a Catholic, is a right-wing creationist or a thoroughly confused individual (or both) remains to be hashed out. Nevertheless, his own statements on the controversy are instructive. “I consider myself a believer with a lot of questions about everything. I’m in the post-modern predicament.” Sternberg’s reference to postmodernism is revealing, since this philosophical outlook provides a fetid medium for the incubation for all manner of idealist and skeptical attitudes towards the real theoretical and practical conquests of science.

These are only two examples of the attempt by the Discovery Institute to cast Intelligent Design as a legitimate scientific position. The Institute has a very conscious strategy that includes a much more ambitious agenda. This agenda was outlined in the so-called “Wedge Document,” an internal memorandum from the Discovery Institute that was leaked in 1999. The document is an ideological weapon aimed at destroying or at least seriously compromising any scientific concept or idea that suggests a materialist explanation for natural phenomena. A few sentences of this manifesto are enough to reveal its thoroughly right-wing character, as well as the fraudulence of the claim that Intelligent Design is anything other than religion masquerading as science.

“The proposition that human beings are created in the image of God is one of the bedrock principles on which Western civilization was built,” the document declares. “Yet a little over a century ago, this cardinal idea came under wholesale attack by intellectuals drawing on the discoveries of modern science. Debunking the traditional conceptions of both God and man, thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud portrayed human beings not as moral and spiritual beings, but as animals or machines who inhabited a universe ruled by purely impersonal forces whose behavior and very thoughts were dictated by the unbending forces of biology, chemistry and environment. This materialistic conception of

reality eventually infected virtually every area of our culture, from politics and economics to literature and art.”

Then the document explains its real intent with crystal clarity. “Finally, materialism spawned a virulent strain of utopianism. Thinking they could engineer the perfect society through the application of scientific knowledge, materialist reformers advocated coercive government programs that falsely promised to create heaven on earth. Discovery Institute’s Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture seeks nothing less than the overthrow of materialism and its cultural legacies.”

The Discovery Institute document then goes on to explain in detail how it seeks to promote its ideas, including publication of papers in journals, regular news coverage and the production of documentaries promoting their ideas. The showing of its film at the Smithsonian Institute is, therefore, a significant step in the advancement of its basic strategy.

As the document makes clear, the attack on science is part of a broader right-wing agenda that includes the destruction of social programs and the elimination of all constraints on the accumulation of wealth. A section of the ruling elite—represented most consistently by the Bush administration—has deliberately waged a campaign on such questions as evolution, stem cell research and the Terri Schiavo case in order to whip up reactionary social layers that will form the basis for militarism and the right-wing economic policies that are its real aim.

An attack on science is a critical component of the right-wing agenda because an understanding of the real nature of material and social life is intimately tied with the development of an opposition to the existing system of social inequality. It is no surprise that the Discovery Institute includes among its three great enemies not only Darwin, but also Marx, thus in its own way confirming the close link between the struggle for science and the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact