The Scopes trial embodied tension between science and modernism versus tradition and fundamentalism during the interwar period. The history behind this trial includes postbellum geographic expansion and economic revolutions; mid-19th century scientific and pseudoscientific trends, which impacted law, public policy, and social movements; and technological advancements, both military and cultural. The celebrities of this case, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, represented these tensions and concerns, and they propelled this case far beyond the confines of Dayton, Tennessee.

The shadow of the Civil War loomed over the Scopes trial. Parties to both the defense and prosecution intended to “re-fight the Civil War”: the North came down to tell Southern “yokels” what is right, while the South intended to honorably defend itself from a Yankee onslaught.[[1]](#footnote-1) This division lent itself to other considerations, as Americans outside Dayton saw this trial as a struggle between the “urban and Progressive North [versus] the rural and traditional South.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Just because the Civil War ended decades prior did not mean it was truly over.

Interpreting the Scopes trial in terms of 19th century ideological, political, and social division is appropriate for much deeper reasons, though. The postbellum expansion of Americans across the continent along with the rise of industry created shifts in social classes that prompted new intellectual, scientific activity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Trends toward laissez-faire economics, where “free markets [were] a moral force and economic ideal,”[[4]](#footnote-4) favored the Rockefellers of the day at the expense of the poor, agricultural, and recent immigrant classes.[[5]](#footnote-5) To justify these trends, industrialists and intellectuals referred to the works of Charles Darwin, Immanuel Kant, and Herbert Spencer, the last of whom popularized Social Darwinism, wherein the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest was misapplied to explain and justify why white, wealthy industrialists were more successful than lower classes.[[6]](#footnote-6) Science permeated more than economics and class ideology, though, exacerbating tensions between modernists and religious fundamentalists. Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein variously challenged the role of religion in dictating morality and man’s place in the universe.[[7]](#footnote-7) These ideas were taught in university and high school level texts, including Scopes’s *Civic Biology*, helping create a generation of young scientists who were less likely to be religious.[[8]](#footnote-8) Science even affected the legal system. The judicial branch strove to “make law a science” through legal formalism,[[9]](#footnote-9) and courts increasingly relied on laissez-faire principles backed by pseudoscientific principles to adjudicate disputes between employers and employees, as with *Lochner v. New York*. This directly fed into Bryan’s desire to be involved in the Scopes case, as Social Darwinism’s preference for limited government action directly countered Bryan’s concept of the role of government.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This unholy alliance of capitalism, science, education, and law bred opposition in the form of populism and progressivism, most notably in the form of the Great Commoner. Although three-time Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan personally did not support laws such as the Butler Act, his populist tendencies led him to assist Tennesseans who did support it. They shared Bryan’s concerns about the dangers of Darwinism[[11]](#footnote-11) and modern industrial society, leading to the Act’s initial passage.[[12]](#footnote-12) Bryan and the rest of America had seen the horrors of World War One, and Bryan blamed German scientism as much as horrifically novel military technologies for the war and its incredible casualty rate.[[13]](#footnote-13) Additionally, as a supporter of labor, Bryan denied the theories that justified industrialism and subsequent class division[[14]](#footnote-14) or that underpinned World War I.[[15]](#footnote-15) Bryan embodied the branch of Protestant Fundamentalism that decided not to accept “Darwin’s” theory of evolution because of its multifaceted, detrimental impact on society,[[16]](#footnote-16) and this led to his involvement in the Scopes case, even if his take on fundamentalism differed slightly from the norm when Darrow interrogated him.[[17]](#footnote-17)

If Bryan represented the past, Clarence Darrow was the future. A famed defense attorney and celebrated atheist, he fully came from the world of the 1920s. Americans during the interwar period were celebrating the Jazz Age and abstract art, skirting Prohibition, enjoying cars and electricity, and engaging in everyday intellectualism, including liberal Protestantism that recognized evolution or even outright agnosticism or atheism.[[18]](#footnote-18) More inclined to view the people of Dayton as “backwards” for their lack of modern material culture and tendencies toward religious fundamentalism, urban Americans rapturously followed the trial via radio. This was the first time they could enjoy such a technological luxury, and the media exploited this to create the circus atmosphere of this trial, exacerbating social tensions.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The historical context that led to the Butler Act and the decision to bring Scopes to trial also created the superstars who argued it, and Bryan and Darrow embodied the tensions of the time—science versus fundamentalism, modernity versus tradition. Ultimately, past and future were on trial in Dayton more than Scopes himself, and the case wouldn’t be settled for decades to come.

1. ChristopherHitchslap, “Scopes Monkey Trial FULL,” *YouTube*, 20 October 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVD4TjxnJ0M. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ernest Nickels, “The Scopes ‘Monkey Trial’: A Debate about Evolution,” in *Famous American Crimes and Trials: 1913-1959*, ed. Frankie Y. Bailey (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kevin Lee, “Inherit the Myth: How William Jennings Bryan’s Struggle with Social Darwinism and Legal Formalism Demythologize the Scopes Monkey Trial,” *Campbell University School of Law Review* 33, no. 347 (2004): 350-351. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 356-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 349-352. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lloyd Chiasson, Jr., “The Case of John Scopes,” in *The Press on Trial: Crimes and Trials as Media Events* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ernest Nickels, “The Scopes ‘Monkey Trial’: A Debate about Evolution,” 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kevin Lee, “Inherit the Myth: How William Jennings Bryan’s Struggle with Social Darwinism and Legal Formalism Demythologize the Scopes Monkey Trial,” 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Douglas O. Linder, “State vs. John Scopes (“The Monkey Trial”): An Account,” *UMKC School of Law*, accessed 20 September 2017, http://www.famous-trials.com/scopesmonkey/2127-home. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jack Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Lecture for week 5” (lecture, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kevin Lee, “Inherit the Myth: How William Jennings Bryan’s Struggle with Social Darwinism and Legal Formalism Demythologize the Scopes Monkey Trial,” 367-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lloyd Chiasson, Jr., “The Case of John Scopes,” 91-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kevin Lee, “Inherit the Myth: How William Jennings Bryan’s Struggle with Social Darwinism and Legal Formalism Demythologize the Scopes Monkey Trial,” 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 364-365. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jack Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Lecture for week 5.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Douglas O. Linder, “State vs. John Scopes (“The Monkey Trial”): An Account,” *UMKC School of Law*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lloyd Chiasson, Jr., “The Case of John Scopes,” 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)