

Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue



Darwinists are communists. And Nazis. They hate our freedom. And—this might be worst of all—they are New Atheists. Or so suggests the film *Expelled*, Ben Stein’s comedic documentary about scientists who have lost their jobs for questioning the Darwinian consensus. Stein is an actor best known for his role as the hapless teacher in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (“Anyone? Anyone?”) and for his role in a game show called *Win Ben Stein’s Money*.

Expelled tells us that the publisher of a science journal for the Smithsonian and professors at George Mason, Iowa State and Baylor universities had the nerve to make sympathetic noises about intelligent design (ID) and for that reason soon got their walking papers. Viewers are told that “many, many more” professors talked to Stein off the record out of fear they would lose their jobs as well. Stein follows what he calls the bread-crumb trail of evidence on the way to concluding that the scientific establishment’s rage against ID reveals its massive insecurity about a failed scientific hypothesis.

Stein has terrific comedic timing. He’s funny simply driving around Seattle looking for the Discovery Institute, an ID think tank. His interviews with sacked profs are interwoven with comedic period pieces, as when a screaming match between an IDer and a Darwinist gives way to Three Stooges-style slaps in black and white.

But then Stein violates Godwin's Law about fighting on blogs: the first person to mention the Nazis loses. And does Stein ever mention the Nazis! Darwin was important to Hitler as to many Social Darwinists because it seemed to give him scientific license to weed out the less-than-fit. Stein quotes Hitler quoting portions of late Darwin that certainly sound like Herbert Spencer and other Social Darwinists, whose work led to experiments in eugenics. This is an ugly history, unknown to many supporters and opponents of Darwin.

I saw *Expelled* at Trinity International University, an evangelical school in Deerfield, Illinois. Trinity sponsored a panel immediately after the movie to deal with questions. Interestingly, several professors at the highly conservative school stepped forth to qualify Stein's claims about Darwin. "Abuse doesn't take away right use," one said, drawing on an ancient and venerable point of logic. "Not all Darwinists became Nazis." In fact, Stein's claims about Darwinists being Nazis are offensive and ridiculous.

Stein violates another unofficial law of argument when he compares his opponents to the Soviets. The Berlin Wall appears as a visual icon throughout the film, which claims that there is a wall fortified with guns running through science; those in the barbaric East are forcibly stopping those in the democratic West from freely examining the evidence. Darwinists and scientific naturalists are the commies, and free-thinking IDers are the ones with history on their side. One preposterous montage weaves images of Stein passionately addressing an audience of high schoolers with images of Ronald Reagan saying, "Tear down this wall!"

The central claim of the film is not so much that ID is correct as that its opponents will stop at nothing to suppress freedom of expression. That claim may pass unchallenged at Trinity and elsewhere on the fundamentalist movie circuit, but not anywhere else. It is no loss of freedom when a discipline maintains its standards of inquiry. This flag-waving opposition to Darwin is mindless.

The film's best moments include IDers and Stein himself taking on the New Atheists, such as Richard Dawkins. ID has legitimate questions to ask about the philosophy of science, Darwinism's relationship to Social Darwinism and Darwinism's latent metaphysical claims. Stein actually corners Dawkins into saying that aliens could conceivably have started life on earth and that signs of their design purposes could be inferred. Stein pounces: Why, he asks, is one sort of study of design imaginable while another is ruled out of court as "religious"?

Motive Entertainment, which is marketing the film and hosted the screening at Trinity, also promoted *The Passion of the Christ* and the Narnia movies. The company has failed to replicate *Passion's* impact, perhaps because its subsequent films haven't generated much controversy. *Expelled* may succeed on that front; several of those interviewed in the film (including Dawkins) have complained that Stein misled them into participating.

Some evangelicals like to cast themselves as victims—and with victimhood comes power in our culture. The screeners at Trinity announced many times that viewers must check their bags and cell phones because they had received “intel” that “opponents” of the film wanted to pirate it to the Web and discredit it before its release. The rhetoric of being a victim of the Darwinist culture mixed with hoo-rah attitude: “That’s not going to happen on my watch!” the organizer shouted, to Amens from the crowd.

A hostile questioner asked the panel why there were no opposing voices on the film to question its intellectual and entertainment genius. “I’ve seen more persecution of scientists by communities like this than anywhere,” he announced. The point was well taken—evangelical schools will grill science professors about what they think of Darwin, and their theologians had best not stick a toe in the water of “liberalism.”

Perhaps oddest of all is the film’s equation of Darwinism with the New Atheists—the people running up sales records at Barnes & Noble. The film wheels in theologians Alister McGrath and John Polkinghorne to fuss at Dawkins, but they’re hardly opponents of Darwinism as such. Darwin and theology are not either/or propositions, no matter what Dawkins, the proponents of ID or the makers of this film suggest.