

The Evolution of Human Sociality

A Darwinian Conflict Perspective

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Preface

The Evolution of Human Sociality is an attempt at a broad theoretical synthesis within the field of sociology and its closely allied sister discipline of anthropology. It is a labor of love that has resulted from nearly a quarter century of sustained thought. I explicate and critique all of the major theoretical approaches and try to draw what I consider the most useful elements of the best of these into a synthesized theory that I call *Darwinian conflict theory*. This theory, more properly called a theoretical perspective or strategy, in the most general sense is a synthesis of the tradition of economic and ecological materialism and conflict theory stemming from Marx and the tradition of biological materialism deriving from Darwin. I originally called this theory *synthetic materialism* (see Sanderson, 1998a, 1998b, 1999:403-8), but I have gradually come to feel that the name is too bland and uninformative. But everyone knows who Darwin was and why he is important, and conflict theory is a term that resonates well with sociologists and is immediately recognizable to them. And, in a sense, the new name is more accurate since Darwinian and neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology and sociobiology—the theoretical foundation of the book—represent a type of conflict theory in which people are competing in a vast game of survival, resource acquisition, and reproduction.

Approximately the first half of the book is taken up with critiques of existing theoretical approaches. More than anything else, I am concerned with the “logic of explanation” of each major approach. I am concerned, for example, with prototypical Marxist and functionalist modes of explanation, not with such things as the myriad characteristics of the functionalist school launched by Talcott Parsons or whether Marxists have started incorporating Weberian ideas into their theories. Another way of putting it is to say that I am concerned with the basic type of explanatory logic that each strategy carries, its most characteristic mode of explaining the social world. My discussion of each theoretical strategy is therefore quite deliberately highly restricted. This then leads to the full elaboration, in formal propositional form, of the synthetic theory.

The second half of the book lays out in as much detail as space allows the large amount of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, that I claim supports Darwinian conflict theory. To a large extent this is the most important part of the book in terms of

getting readers to be open to my approach. The substantive areas concerning which the evidence is drawn are those that have been of crucial concern to both sociology and anthropology for much of their existence. A significant omission is the topic of ethnicity. I leave this topic aside here because of space limitations and also because the topic is so important, so vast, and so emotionally charged that I feel it deserves a book of its own.

I am grateful to Donald Brown, Andre Gunder Frank, Art Alderson, Jerome Barkow, Alexandra Maryanski, Joseph Lopreato, Penny Anthon Green, Herbert Hunter, Alex Heckert, and Ray Scupin for their comments on early versions of the main ideas behind this book as they existed in various conference papers. Pierre van den Berghe and Bruce Lerro read the entire manuscript in its penultimate form and I am most grateful to them for having done so. Timothy Crippen read one of the early conference papers, the chapter on sociobiology, and all of the evidence chapters and made many useful comments that I have been able to incorporate into the final revisions.

I want to single out Pierre van den Berghe for special mention. He has influenced my thinking in this book more than any other single individual. When his book *Man in Society: A Biosocial View* first appeared in 1975, I was immediately taken by it and used it for several years as a text in my introductory course. Later he returned the favor by using various editions of my *Macrosociology: An Introduction to Human Societies* in his course on comparative societies until his retirement a few years ago. Pierre and I began an intellectual correspondence in the late 1970s that has continued down to this day, a correspondence that has been a source of great satisfaction for me. For many years he argued that most of my thinking was highly compatible with sociobiology and urged me to "take the plunge" and incorporate sociobiological ideas more fully. Eventually the lightbulb went on and I did, as this book testifies. Pierre has the crucial traits a good sociologist should have: irreverence, iconoclasm, wit, a resistance to intellectual fads, a methodological eclecticism, a willingness to put together the best of the best theoretical schools, and a penchant for the truth rather than the popularity of one's ideas. Had Pierre not existed, this book would not exist, at least not in its current form. I would therefore have had to invent him or not write the book. Pierre also suggested the book's title, which I gladly accepted over my two original titles in the interest of reaching the broadest possible audience.

Randall Collins, another sociologist for whom I have great admiration, does not like the theoretical synthesis this book creates even though I have tried to convince him that it is highly compatible with his own version of conflict theory and, in fact, serves as the necessary grounding for that theory. Randy even went so far as to urge me not to write the book, saying that there would be hostility to it from mainstream sociologists. It is the first time he has not been complimentary of one of my books. For better or worse, I have not heeded his advice. He is undoubtedly right: Many sociologists will reject the main arguments of this book. However, many of the leading ideas in modern thought were initially rejected, even in markedly hostile form, when they were first proposed. One thinks, for example, of Galileo or Darwin. I am not so presumptuous as to put myself in the company of these great men; I am simply saying that I believe that the most controversial ideas of this book will eventually lose their controversial status and become widely accepted throughout the social sciences. Indeed, the trend is already apparent, if not in my own discipline of sociology.

For a quarter of a century I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses in sociological theory at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. This has provided me with an enormous amount of intellectual stimulation and allowed me the opportunity to think through many of the ideas developed in this book much more thoroughly than would otherwise have been possible. I am extremely grateful to all of the students in these classes for having made all of this possible, especially to those who really challenged me to articulate and justify my arguments. I am also grateful to Indiana University of Pennsylvania for granting me a sabbatical leave during the fall semester of 1999 so I could finish the book's penultimate draft.

I am very pleased that my editor at Rowman & Littlefield, Dean Birkenkamp, agreed to publish this book and demonstrated such enthusiasm for it. Dean is easily the nicest editor in publishing and one of the best. I hope the book can live up to his expectations. Finally, I wish to thank my graduate assistant, Mary Reilly, for her extremely careful checking of the bibliography, which permitted me to correct several errors and provide missing references.

When I was about eleven or twelve years old I discovered biology and it was love at first sight. By the end of high school I somehow got diverted into psychology, and then in my first year of college into sociology. I was better at biology than at any other subject I ever studied, and perhaps should have stayed in it. But I have no regrets, because I have found the study of society fascinating. I have, in a sense, now come full circle, reuniting sociology with my first great love. It makes me very happy to be able to contribute to the unification of the biological and social sciences.

Most of the epigrams used throughout this book have been drawn from Thiessen (1998). Portions of chapter 10 were published in Stephen K. Sanderson and Joshua Dubrow, "Fertility decline in the modern world and in the original demographic transition: Testing three theories with cross-national data," *Population and Environment* 21:511-37, 2000. Portions of chapter 13 were published in Stephen K. Sanderson, "Explaining monogamy and polygyny in human societies: Comment on Kanazawa and Still," *Social Forces* September 2001. Portions of chapter 16 will be published in Stephen K. Sanderson, "Political evolution and war: A Darwinian conflict perspective." In Vincent S.E. Falger and John Vasquez (eds.), *Evolutionary International Relations: A Biopolitical Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, forthcoming 2001).