

EVOLUTIONISM AND ITS CRITICS

Praise for Social Evolutionism

“Sanderson’s *Social Evolutionism* is everything graduate students want to prepare for their generals: a succinct, clear presentation of over a century of evolutionary thinking in the social sciences, with incisive criticisms. The main strands of social evolutionism are skillfully disentangled and related to biological evolutionism. I can think of no better text to use in any course on sociological theory.”

—Pierre van den Berghe, University of Washington

“A gifted expositor, ... Sanderson provides more than explication and critique. He turns from social-scientific treatments of evolution to a thoughtful exploration of what evolutionary biology (as it actually exists) can contribute to social analysis, and then returns to answer standard grounds for rejecting evolutionary thinking in all its guises. He shows that the standard objections apply only to some sorts of evolutionary models, and leave others virtually untouched. Sanderson commends those unscathed others to the attention of everyone who cares about the study of long-term, large-scale social change.”

—Charles Tilly, Columbia University

“Historians interested in theories of social evolution will find Stephen K. Sanderson’s book a spirited, fair-minded, and useful survey and critique of these works, written variously by sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and biologists, from the time of Herbert Spencer, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Edward Burnett Tylor to the present. ... Without question one will come away from it with a good grasp of major contributions to social evolutionary theory and of the arguments for and against each of them, illustrated in many cases with specific historical examples.”

—John C. Greene, University of Connecticut

“*Social Evolutionism* is the best available single volume examination of this complex and contentious theoretical tradition. Its numerous strengths are impressive ... [and it is] written with clarity and coherence that is rare in scholarly treatments of evolutionary theory. ... Scholars interested in social evolutionary theory will want it on their shelves as a standard reference work.”

—Mark A. Shields, Georgia Institute of Technology

“At a time when social and historical thinking on the grand scale is very much on the defensive, it is encouraging to read this fine, boldly stated, but reflective account of the rich tradition of social evolutionism.”

—Ted Benton, University of Essex

“Sanderson writes with admirable clarity, and with a relaxed, easy-going (yet unpatronizing) style. There is none of the jargon and intellectual pomposity that afflict so much writing in sociological and anthropological theory. Indeed, the book would be readily comprehensible to a virtual beginner with little or no previous knowledge of the field.”

—*London Times Higher Education Supplement*

“A masterpiece.”

—Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, Indiana University-Purdue; University at Fort Wayne

EVOLUTIONISM AND
ITS CRITICS
DECONSTRUCTING AND
RECONSTRUCTING AN
EVOLUTIONARY INTERPRETATION
OF HUMAN SOCIETY

Stephen K. Sanderson



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Prologue

EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES have a long history. They date back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century, although there were precursors in the thinking of various French and Scottish Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century. These theories have ebbed and flowed over this entire time, being extremely popular and influential in some periods and avoided like the plague in others. Currently, evolutionary theories exist but they are not popular. In sociology, there was a rebirth of historical sociology in the 1970s, but for the most part this revival did not include evolutionary thinking. Indeed, many historical sociologists reject evolutionary theories of society, often emphatically. Evolutionism is still widely influential in archaeology, but in the rest of anthropology it seems to have reached a genuine nadir.

This book is a critical history of evolutionary theories in sociology and anthropology, and it seeks to defend evolutionism against its many and varied critics. It seeks to show that evolutionism has been much misunderstood, and thus unfairly criticized. Not all of the criticisms are unfair, but even those that are on target apply only to certain versions of evolutionary theorizing, to specific evolutionary theories rather than to evolutionism as a whole or to evolutionism in principle. This is what is intended by the term *deconstructing* in the book's subtitle: I seek to deconstruct not only the wide array of social evolutionary theories, but the criticisms of the antievolutionists as well. Deconstructing evolutionary theories means laying bare their fundamental epistemological, methodological, conceptual, and theoretical assumptions and principles. Deconstructing antievolutionism means showing just where and how the critics have, for the most part, gone wrong. But the book aims to *reconstruct* as well as deconstruct. This takes the form of building, on the shoulders of the evolutionary giants, a comprehensive evolutionary interpretation of human society and setting forth as much evidence as space permits to support such an interpretation.

My serious interest in evolutionary theories in the social sciences was first kindled when I read, in late 1976, Marvin Harris's magisterial *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), one of the greatest books ever written in the

entire history of the social sciences (it came to be known to two generations of anthropology students as “the RAT”). I had never paid any particular attention to such theories before that, except for the kind of evolutionary approach taken by Gerhard Lenski in his excellent *Power and Privilege* (1966) and *Human Societies* (1970). I was well aware that evolutionary theories had been severely criticized, but Lenski’s work impressed me as an exemplary way of doing sociology. I was sufficiently impressed with it to contemplate using *Human Societies* as a textbook for one of my courses. When I read the RAT, the affinities between Harris’s materialist evolutionary approach and Lenski’s brand of evolutionism struck me. As a result, I began to study *Human Societies* more thoroughly and eventually started teaching from it. (Later I would write a similar book of my own, *Macrosociology: An Introduction to Human Societies*, published originally in 1988, with successive editions in 1991, 1995, and 1999, and a successor, *World Societies: The Evolution of Human Social Life* [Sanderson and Alderson, 2005].)

About the same time (early 1977) the philosopher of history Maurice Mandelbaum of Johns Hopkins University invited me to study with him in a summer postdoctoral seminar. During that seminar I pursued what I was then calling “evolutionary theory,” which I thought was a relatively homogeneous approach to the study of social life. My work in the seminar concentrated mainly on the work of those anthropological evolutionists who, since the 1930s, had been insisting on the legitimacy and importance of an evolutionary approach to human society: Gordon Childe, Leslie White, Julian Steward, Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, Marvin Harris, Morton Fried, Robert Carneiro, Gerhard Lenski, and a few others. I paid no real attention to the classical evolutionists, to any contemporary Marxian evolutionists, or to the evolutionary approach developed by Talcott Parsons and others who followed his version of functionalism. For me, evolutionism was basically coterminous with the ideas promoted by the above-named thinkers (Parsons excepted).

Fortunately, I was soon to disabuse myself of this very naïve notion. As I thought more about these issues after the seminar ended, I began to realize that evolutionism was a global term used to describe a wide array of theories that often differed dramatically. Indeed, it became obvious that some of these theories had almost nothing in common except for a commitment to identifying and explaining sequences of directional social change. And thus the original idea for this book was born. Someone needed, I thought, to write a book surveying the variety of evolutionary theories in the social sciences and showing that the word “evolutionism” was a vague omnibus term that meant little unless it was specified much more carefully.

My interest in writing such a book was also sparked by reading, during Mandelbaum’s seminar, his *History, Man, and Reason* (1971). In this book Mandelbaum attacked evolutionary theories by arguing that they were based upon an illegitimate notion that he termed a *directional law*: a law positing that sequences of historical change represented the unfolding of

latent potentialities toward some end state. Societies evolved because it was somehow inherent in their nature to do so, and the stages through which they evolved were essential to their reaching the goal for which they were striving. Mandelbaum thought that whatever directional sequences might be identified in history had to be explained in terms of *functional laws*, or laws relating specific variables at specific times and in specific places.

Mandelbaum concentrated his attack on the classical evolutionists of the second half of the nineteenth century, but it was obvious that he thought modern evolutionary theories suffered from the same defect. At the time I thought that he may well have been right for the classical evolutionists, but it seemed to me that he was quite wrong for many modern evolutionists. And thus I identified one of the major themes of the book: In the history of social evolutionism there had been a general abandonment of conceptions of social evolution based on directional laws and a shift toward the kinds of explanatory models of evolutionary change that Mandelbaum thought were epistemologically unobjectionable.

Evolutionism and Its Critics is a successor to my *Social Evolutionism: A Critical History*, originally published by Blackwell in 1990. The former started out as a second edition of the latter, but as the revision neared completion it appeared that something like half of the book was new. At that point my publisher, Dean Birkenkamp, and I decided that we really had a new book. Hence the new title and subtitle.

Evolutionism and Its Critics reflects a major change in my thinking on several key points, in particular the relationship between social evolution and human progress. *Social Evolutionism* was resolutely antiprogressivist, arguing that the concept of progress was too subjective and value-laden to be meaningfully employed. I now regard this view as mistaken. I go on to identify a number of criteria that can be used as objective indicators of human progress and employ them to show that over the past 10,000 years the relationship between social evolution and progress has been for the most part curvilinear. There was a long and steady decline after the shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture and the increasing intensification of agriculture, but then a dramatic upturn with the rise and expansion of industrial capitalism in the past two centuries.

Another feature of *Social Evolutionism* that I have now reconsidered is the rather severe critique of Gerhard Lenski's evolutionism. I went overboard in this critique. In *Evolutionism and Its Critics* I still indicate disagreements with some aspects of Lenski's evolutionism, but I think my treatment is now fairer and more balanced. I know it is not as harsh. Lenski's contribution to modern social evolutionism, and to sociological theory more generally, has been a major and important one, and it is very important to me to hereby explicitly acknowledge that.

Among the scholars who have helped in the preparation of this book, I am grateful to Pierre van den Berghe for his excellent advice that the book

would benefit greatly by having a chapter comparing and contrasting various themes in evolutionary biology and social evolutionism. With respect to the same chapter, I also thank Steven Gaulin for reminding me of the importance of George Williams's definitive work *Adaptation and Natural Selection* (1966). I have also benefited from the Dutch social theorist Dik Betlem's penetrating criticisms of the original manuscript. Betlem doubted that Marx was a developmentalist, and thought it impossible that G. A. Cohen himself could be. In response to this claim, in Chapter 4 I call attention to several crucial passages in Cohen's book that show beyond any real doubt that he is clearly a developmentalist, quoting two of them at length. Also, in Chapter 10 I have improved my discussion of the likely reasons for growing complexity in biological evolution (Betlem was severely critical of a major part of that discussion). I also try to explain why a "drive for mastery," although itself not a universal human motive, may be rooted in, and thus an extension of, human drives that are universal. I am grateful to Betlem for forcing me to rethink and clarify these issues.

Discussions with other social evolutionists over the years have helped me to clarify and, I hope, sharpen my thinking on a number of matters. I am especially indebted to fellow evolutionists Chris Chase-Dunn, Tom Hall, Bob Carneiro, Bruce Lerro, Jon Turner, Sandy Maryanski, and the late Andre Gunder Frank for numerous stimulating conversations, both face-to-face at conferences and through correspondence. I have also benefited from a fairly extensive correspondence with Randy Collins for the better part of two decades. He is not a devotee of social evolutionism, but is an excellent comparative-historical sociologist nonetheless, a subfield of sociology that evolutionists must draw on heavily in building their theories.

The trouble with thanking people in prefaces is that there is always a great risk of inadvertently leaving someone out and making them feel unappreciated. It is virtually impossible to avoid this if you have any sizable intellectual network at all. So, to anyone who feels left out, my apologies in advance.

I am pleased that Dean Birkenkamp of Paradigm Publishers enthusiastically agreed to publish this book and for the suggestions he made regarding its final form. Counting the two books he published when he was with Rowman and Littlefield, this makes the fourth book of mine that he has published (with a fifth soon to appear and a strong likelihood that there will be more).

Stephen K. Sanderson