

STUDIES IN SOCIAL DISCONTINUITY

Edited by CHARLES TILLY

SOCIAL EVOLUTIONISM

A CRITICAL HISTORY



Stephen K. Sanderson

Social Evolutionism

A Critical History

STEPHEN K. SANDERSON

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Preface

My serious interest in evolutionary theories in the social sciences was first kindled when I read, in late 1976, Marvin Harris's *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968). I had never paid any particular attention to such theories before that, except for the kind of evolutionary model developed by Gerhard Lenski in *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 Harris's magisterial work, the affinities between his 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.

About the same time (early 1977) the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum of Johns Hopkins University invited me to study with him in a summer postdoctoral seminar. During that seminar I intensively pursued what I was then calling "evolutionary theory," which I thought was a relatively homogeneous and coherent 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: 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 Marxist 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.

Fortunately, I was soon to disabuse myself of this very naive notion. As I thought more about these issues after the seminar had ended, I began to

recognize that evolutionism was a global term used to describe a vast array of theories that differed markedly. 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 idea of writing this book was born. Someone needed, I thought, to write a book surveying the variety of evolutionary theories in the social sciences and showing in detail that the word "evolutionism" was a vague omnibus term that meant very little unless it were specified much further.

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 he termed a *directional law*: a law positing that sequences of historical change represented the unfolding of latent potentialities toward some endstate. 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 thought I had identified one of the major themes of the book: in the history of social evolutionism there had been a general abandonment of directional-law conceptions of social evolution and a shift toward the kinds of explanatory models of evolutionary change that Mandelbaum thought were epistemologically unobjectionable.

I would have started this book right away, but I had slightly earlier conceived the idea of writing an undergraduate sociology textbook that would be built along the lines of a materialist evolutionary approach. This textbook would draw extensively on the ideas of Lenski and Harris, but would modify them in certain ways and liberally throw in a number of related notions. That book was finally completed and published as *Macrosociology: An Introduction to Human Societies* in 1988. I am somewhat embarrassed to say that it took so long, but the reason is that my ideas underwent some major changes as I was writing. As I wrote I was gradually moving increasingly away from Lenski's brand of evolutionism without quite realizing it, and by the time a first draft was done I realized that the later chapters fit awkwardly with the early ones. The book was finished only after a substantial period of reconceptualization. It represents, in the considerably simplified form that textbooks require, what I think the broad

outlines of an adequate evolutionary theory look like. It is a theory very different from Lenski's in many important respects. It looks much more like Harris's evolutionary model, but with the incorporation of many ideas from certain Marxian and Weberian versions of historical sociology.

Once this textbook was finished I began to write the present book, which might be regarded as a higher-level theoretical companion to the text. In the interim of many years since I first conceived this book, I have learned much more about all sorts of evolutionary theories, and my thinking has changed on some issues. For example, it is now clear to me that there are contemporary versions of evolutionary theory that are firmly rooted in a directional-law mode of explanation. In addition, I now recognize that the concept of adaptation is more problematic than I originally thought and thus requires a full-scale discussion of its uses and potential abuses. I have also become aware of the need to bring into focus the relation between theories of social evolution and theorizing in evolutionary biology.

My overall conception of the book, though, is essentially the same. Thus the book before you will survey the broad range of evolutionary theories in the social sciences, compare and contrast them to each other, and critically examine their logical and epistemological foundations. I originally intended that it would also set forth and defend a particular evolutionary model of societal change. But it is now apparent that this is a task much too large to be relegated to a chapter or two at the end. I am hopeful of eventually completing this task, but that will require another volume.

This book has benefitted from the critical commentary and advice of a number of people. Michael Armer, Christopher Chase-Dunn, John Hofley, Pierre van den Berghe, and Erik Olin Wright read the introduction and commented on the worthwhileness of the project as a whole. A critical reaction to one or more chapters was provided by Andrew Altman (chapter 4), Randall Breitwisch (chapter 8), Randall Collins (chapters 1 and 7), Robert Graber (chapters 2 and 7), and Michael Ruse (chapter 8). I am especially grateful for the comments of Breitwisch and Ruse on chapter 8 because, as an evolutionary biologist and a philosopher of evolutionary biology respectively, they have reassured me that I have not made a complete mess of my incursions into that field. Regarding that same chapter, I benefitted from being reminded by Steven Gaulin of the importance of George Williams's *Adaptation and Natural Selection* (1966) for many of the issues being discussed. It is essential to add that, had it not been for Pierre van den Berghe's reaction to the proposed project, there would have been no such chapter. I am confident that this has improved the manuscript significantly, even though I know that van den Berghe will strongly disagree with some of the conclusions reached in the chapter.

Charles Tilly and Robert Carneiro read the entire manuscript and offered numerous suggestions that I am certain have helped me produce a

better book. I really owe a very special debt of gratitude to Carneiro for the enormous effort he put into his critical reading. He took a great deal of time out from his own work to produce a line-by-line analysis that resulted in literally hundreds of specific comments. He has saved me from some errors and dubious interpretations and made a variety of suggestions that I have found helpful. I feel compelled to point out that, although Bob and I agree on a great deal, he has some substantial objections to several of my conclusions. And obviously neither he, nor any of the above-named persons, bears any responsibility for the failings of this book. I alone am responsible, especially since I have been too stubborn to take a lot of the advice I was given.

I am extremely pleased that Peter Dougherty and Sean Magee agreed to have this book published by Basil Blackwell, and I am grateful to Romesh Vaitilingam of Blackwell for seeing it through to publication.

I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for providing me with a summer seminar at Johns Hopkins University in 1977 that led to the initial conceptualization of this book. I also thank the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, The Netherlands, with which I was associated as a visiting lecturer during the first four months of 1988. This gave me an opportunity to present a series of lectures based on initial drafts of several chapters of the book, as well as to have time to work on other chapters. This Dutch interlude was made possible by a sabbatical leave granted by my own university, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, for which I am appreciative.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife, Ruth, for her usual support of my intellectual endeavors, and to my children, Derek and Sarah, for providing delightful diversions from the tensions that inevitably accompany book-length projects.

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