

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



Paradigm Publishers
Boulder • London

*To the memory of my father and mother,
Waller Eugene Sanderson (1920–1987) and
Marjorie King Sanderson (1921–1995)*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be transmitted or reproduced in any media or form, including electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or informational storage and retrieval systems, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Copyright © 2007 by Paradigm Publishers

Published in the United States by Paradigm Publishers, 3360 Mitchell Lane Suite E,
Boulder, Colorado 80301 USA.

Paradigm Publishers is the trade name of Birkenkamp & Company, LLC,
Dean Birkenkamp, President and Publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sanderson, Stephen K.

Evolutionism and its critics: deconstructing and reconstructing an evolutionary interpretation of human society/Stephen K. Sanderson.

p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59451-301-5

ISBN-10: 1-59451-301-5

1. Social evolution. I. Title.

GN360.S263 2006

303.4—dc22

2006021987

Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper that meets the standards of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Designed and Typeset in New Baskerville by Straight Creek Bookmakers.

11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5

Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	vii
Chapter 1 The Nature of Social Evolutionism	1
Chapter 2 Classical Evolutionism: I Herbert Spencer, 10 • Lewis Henry Morgan, 12 • Edward Burnett Tylor, 14 • The Epistemologies of the Classical Evolutionists, 16 • Ordinary Causal Explanation in the Classical Evolutionists, 21 • The Classical Evolutionists and Darwinism, 27 • Classical Evolutionism and the Doctrine of Progress, 30 • Notes, 33	10
Chapter 3 The Antievolutionary Reaction Classical Evolutionism and the Comparative Method, 36 • Were the Classical Evolutionists Unilinearists? 40 • Classical Evolutionism and Diffusion, 42 • The Contributions of the Classical Evolutionists, 44 • Notes, 45	35
Chapter 4 Marxism as Evolutionism Cohen's Interpretation of Marx, 50 • Was Marx a Technological Determinist? 52 • Was Marx a Developmentalist? 53 • An Alternative Conception of Marx's Theory of History, 58 • Marx's Periodization of History, 60 • Engels's Evolutionism, 62 • Marx, Engels, and Morgan, 66 • The Darwinian Connection, 68 • Conclusions, 69 • Notes, 71	49
Chapter 5 Classical Evolutionism: II L. T. Hobhouse, 74 • William Graham Sumner and Albert Galloway Keller, 83 • Edward Westermarck, 94 • Comparisons and Conclusions, 99 • Notes, 102	74
Chapter 6 The Evolutionary Revival V. Gordon Childe, 105 • Leslie White, 113 • Julian Steward, 120 • Some Comparisons and Conclusions, 125 • Notes, 129	105
	v

Chapter 7 Sociological Evolutionism: I	132
Parsons's Theory of Social Evolution, 133 • The Logical Structure of Parsonian Evolutionism, 137 • Parsons's Theory of Social Evolution: A Critique, 143 • Talcott Parsons: The American Hegel, 148 • Conclusion, 150 • Notes, 152	
Chapter 8 Anthropological Evolutionism Since 1960	154
The Evolutionism of the Young Marshall Sahlins, 154 • Elman Service's Functionalist Evolutionism, 157 • Robert Carneiro's Spencerian Evolutionism, 161 • Marvin Harris's Materialist Evolutionism, 172 • Coda: Marxian Alternatives to Anthropological Evolutionism, 183 • Notes, 188	
Chapter 9 Sociological Evolutionism: II	192
Gerhard Lenski's Ecological-Evolutionary Theory, 192 • Jonathan Turner's Institutional Selectionism, 206 • Maryanski and Turner's Normative Evolutionism, 212 • World-System Theory and Social Evolutionism, 214 • In the Parsonian Tradition, 218 • Notes, 221	
Chapter 10 Evolutionary Biology and Social Evolutionism	223
The Concept of Adaptation in Biological and Social Evolutionism, 223 • Biological and Social Evolution as Processes of Differentiation, 235 • Evolutionary Progress, 246 • A Note on Darwinian Theories of Social Evolution, 258 • Notes, 260	
Chapter 11 Contemporary Antievolutionism	263
Evolutionism and External Influences, 264 • Evolutionism and the Comparative Method, 267 • Evolutionism and Human Agency, 268 • Evolutionism and Human Psychology, 272 • Evolutionism and Directionality, 273 • Notes, 276	
Chapter 12 Evolutionary Materialism: A General Theory of Social Evolution	280
The Theoretical Strategy of Evolutionary Materialism, 282 • In What Way and When May Social Evolution Be Progressive? 307 • Conclusion: The Quality of Life in Different Social Systems, 321	
<i>Epilogue</i>	326
<i>References</i>	331
<i>Index</i>	353
<i>About the Author</i>	374

Prologue

EVOOLUTIONARY 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

Chapter One

The Nature of Social Evolutionism

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES in the social sciences over the past century and a half: their history, their diversity, their underlying intellectual assumptions, and their adequacy as modes of explaining social life. Social scientists have long had a love-hate relationship with these sorts of theories. The disciplines of sociology and anthropology were virtually born evolutionary, for most of the leading founders of these fields embraced evolutionism of one type or another, some of them strongly so. The person who is usually credited with being the “father” of sociology, Auguste Comte, had a thoroughly evolutionary conception of the development of modern industrial society, one that was based on a view of the expansion of the powers of the human mind. Emile Durkheim carried on some of Comte’s basic evolutionary ideas. Although he did so in modified form, and although his evolutionary ideas are generally regarded as less significant than many of his other notions, he had an evolutionary perspective nonetheless. Even markedly different thinkers like Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer were very much evolutionists. Marx’s theory of history makes no real sense except as a type of evolutionism, and Spencer was so much an evolutionist that he attempted to formulate a law of evolutionary change that applied not only to societies but to the totality of phenomena in the universe. Although the evolutionary doctrines of Marx and Spencer were fundamentally different, both rested on similar intellectual assumptions implicit in nineteenth-century thought. To a large extent, these assumptions, which were actually heritages of the Enlightenment, were shared as well by both Comte and Durkheim.

In anthropology, the story is much the same. The individual whom anthropologists generally regard as the “father” of their discipline, Edward Burnett Tylor, was famous for his evolutionary outlook. Tylor’s American contemporary, Lewis Henry Morgan, was even more thoroughly imbued

with evolutionism. His greatest work was a massive attempt to trace the major outlines of cultural evolution from simplest prehistoric times to the present. But Morgan and Tylor were only the most prominent of a range of evolutionary thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century whom modern anthropologists regard as their intellectual ancestors.

The heyday of evolutionism was the second half of the nineteenth century, for it was then that the doctrines of Morgan, Tylor, Spencer, Marx, and others were being produced. This "golden age" of evolutionary social science came rather suddenly to an end shortly after the turn of the century, however, and the first few decades of the twentieth century represented a sort of "dark age" for evolutionism. During this time evolutionism was severely criticized and came to be regarded as an outmoded approach that self-respecting scholars should no longer take seriously. Evolutionary theories did not die out completely, but they were seldom seen, and even the word "evolution" came to be uttered at serious risk to one's intellectual reputation. Antievolutionism, rather than evolutionism, was the watchword of the day.

Yet the reign of antievolutionism was itself to last no longer than had the evolutionism that preceded it. By the 1930s some scholars were beginning to take evolutionism seriously again, and by the 1940s an "evolutionary revival" was well under way. By the 1960s an evolutionary perspective was advocated by many anthropologists. The anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s was not dominated by evolutionism as was the anthropology of a century earlier, but a whole new generation of evolutionary thinkers built their formulations on the new foundations that had been established in the 1940s and 1950s. This revival of evolutionism was more an anthropological than a sociological phenomenon, but sociologists were significantly involved nevertheless. Sociology's best-known theorist, Talcott Parsons, extended his own thinking along distinctly evolutionary lines, and the sociologist Gerhard Lenski was developing a different sort of evolutionary theory at almost exactly the same time.

It turns out, though, that contemporary social science has its own antievolutionists. In the late 1960s Robert Nisbet published a major attack against evolutionary theories of all types, both classical and contemporary. That Nisbet's book was very well received indicated that many sociologists were still skeptical about evolutionary interpretations, or that the new wave of sociological interest in evolutionism had already begun to turn sour. About the same time Maurice Mandelbaum, a philosopher well acquainted with the social sciences, published a critique of evolutionary theories that replicated many of Nisbet's objections. One of the most recent all-out attacks on social evolutionism has been made by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, who declares that evolutionary theories are so multiply deficient that social theory must rid itself of them entirely. Giddens makes some of the same criticisms that preoccupied Nisbet and Mandelbaum, but he has added quite a few others as well.

Unfortunately, what has been obscured in this thumbnail sketch of the fate of evolutionary theories in the history of social science is an extremely important fact: the terms “evolutionary theory” or “evolutionism” are extraordinarily general ones for characterizing a range of ideas that do share certain basic assumptions but that otherwise are often radically different. The employment of such terms without further specification as to the particular type of evolutionary theory that is intended results in extremely misleading and, quite frequently, useless talk. Along these lines the philosopher Stephen Toulmin has suggested that social scientists have created enormous confusion for themselves by persistently failing to distinguish between *evolutionist* and *evolutionary* formulations. Toulmin argues that this conflation was especially characteristic of the nineteenth century, but that these separate notions have not been completely disentangled even in contemporary social science. For Toulmin, evolutionist formulations are those that account for long-term societal changes “in some mysterious way, as the ‘conclusions’ of a Cosmic Argument, which unfolds ‘logical implications’ operative throughout the whole History of Society” (Toulmin, 1972:329). Evolutionary formulations, on the other hand, are those that, like Darwin’s account of biological evolution, attempt to explain changes as responses to the particular requirements imbedded in specific historical situations.

This conflation of evolutionist and evolutionary theories is perhaps the most serious problem currently facing intelligent critical discussion of theories of social evolution. But other serious difficulties arise as well from the casual use of terminology, for theories that have been labeled evolutionist or evolutionary have differed in several other major respects. For example, although the terminology of evolution in one way or another has been used to characterize the theories of the sociologist Talcott Parsons and the anthropologist Marvin Harris, these theories actually have very little in common. Parsons’s more evolutionist account (in Toulmin’s sense of evolutionist) is a version of cultural idealism that sets forth entirely different mechanisms from those proposed in Harris’s materialist and evolutionary (again, in Toulmin’s sense) account. About all Harris and Parsons agree on is that history reveals important patterns of change and that it is important to formulate a general theory to explain those patterns.

Nevertheless, the fact that the common label “evolutionary” (in the loose sense) or its equivalent persistently attaches to such theories in spite of their differences suggests that there is a basic core of elements that they share. What, then, do evolutionary theories have in common even when all their differences are ignored? What would be a set of minimal criteria for identifying such theories? Anthony Giddens (1984) has proposed several basic characteristics by which we can recognize any sort of evolutionary account of social life. He suggests that many evolutionary theories are based on an endogenous or “unfolding” model of change. That is, they assume that social changes occur as the result of the internal development of the latent

potentialities originally built into a society. As he notes, the word evolution itself was originally derived from the Latin *evolutia*, meaning an “unrolling,” and that it was first used to speak about the unrolling of parchments (cf. Service, 1971b).

In addition to this criterion, which he apparently believes is not a foolproof identifying mark of an evolutionary theory, Giddens lists four traits that he believes are such marks. First, there must be at least some conceptual continuity with biological evolution: “To use the term ‘evolution’ in the social sciences is rather gratuitous if it does not have at least some connections with the conceptual vocabulary which has become established in biology” (1984:231). An evolutionary theory must also postulate a sequence of stages through which some phenomenon progresses from “lower” to “higher” forms, and the criteria for this progression must be identified independently of a notion of “moral progress” (although Giddens adds that evolutionary theories are prone to conflate progression and progress). In addition, a genuinely evolutionary theory must also specify a mechanism or set of mechanisms that will explain the postulated sequence of stages, and it must show how the explanatory mechanism produces the displacement of one stage by another. Finally, Giddens claims that evolutionary theories presume that the entire spectrum of changes in human history can be accounted for in terms of the adaptive character of these changes. Indeed, “the notion of adaptation is so important in evolutionary theories that without it they lose most of their cogency” (1984:233).

Giddens’s delineation of the basic features of evolutionary theories is not without its merits, but it does contain certain errors and overstatements. In the first place, he greatly overestimates the extent to which evolutionary theories rely on endogenous and unfolding models. It is true that evolutionary theories do tend to give pride of place to internal factors in societal change, but even the most endogenist of them never fail to take external factors (e.g., diffusion, war) into account at some point, and in many evolutionary theories external factors play a substantial role. As for the notion that unfolding models are typical of evolutionary theories, this is simply untrue. The nineteenth-century evolutionists were most prone toward this kind of model, but it has been gradually abandoned in the development of evolutionary theories in the twentieth century, with the exception of Parsonian evolutionism and other forms of evolutionism that draw upon Parsons. Rather than explaining historical changes in terms of the grand unfolding of latent potentialities toward some endpoint, most contemporary evolutionary theories explain them “as responses to the particular requirements imbedded in specific historical situations.”

Giddens’s suggestions that evolutionary theories must specify a progression of stages and a mechanism designed to explain the sequence are well argued, and he is correct to note that there is often a tendency for evolutionary thinkers to convert progression into “progress.” However, there is no

inherent connection between an evolutionary theory and a belief in steady human progress. We can have one without the other. Indeed, as we shall see, certain contemporary evolutionary thinkers have explicitly argued against equating evolution with progress, even to the point of tracing out the actual *retrogressive* aspects of social evolution.

Giddens's other two criteria are open to serious objection. A number of social evolutionary theorists have stressed a conceptual concordance between their theories and bioevolutionary theories, some even attempting to build theories of social evolution along Darwinian lines. But this feature is a secondary aspect of many theories, and in any event social evolutionary theories can be formulated and judged on their own terms. Contrary to Giddens, the terms "evolution" and "evolutionary" have meaning quite apart from their usage in evolutionary biology.

Giddens's claim that the concept of adaptation is vital to evolutionary theories is entirely correct. However, he fails to appreciate that this concept is a complex and subtle one that has several different dimensions, and thus it can be put to quite varied uses. Giddens thinks that the concept implies a transhistorical human drive for "mastery," and that it is closely linked to a conception of progress—that evolutionary theories postulate improved adaptation with social evolution. It must be admitted that such a conception of adaptation has been characteristic of a number of different evolutionary theories. However, the concept of adaptation is often used in a quite different way. In the evolutionism of Marvin Harris, for example, the concept implies neither a basic human tendency toward "mastery" nor a belief that adaptation is somehow a quality that increases throughout social evolution. For Harris, adaptation is a concept that principally relates to how individuals make choices under particular kinds of material constraints. Thus, while the concept of adaptation may be basic to most evolutionary theories, it is so in a more complicated and problematic way than Giddens recognizes.

Erik Olin Wright (1983) has offered a very different set of criteria for identifying an evolutionary theory, being prompted to develop them because of his own dissatisfaction with Giddens's criteria. He suggests that for a theory to be considered evolutionary it must have three features:

1. It must propose a typology of social forms with potential directionality.
2. It must order these social forms in the way it does on the assumption that the probability of remaining at the same stage in the typology is greater than the probability of regressing.
3. It must assert a probability of transition from one stage of the typology to another.

It therefore claims the existence of a tendency toward directionality, no matter how weak, in social change. It is also clear that Wright demands the presence of a mechanism that would explain such a directional tendency.

for he goes on to say that his definition of an evolutionary theory does not imply a universal mechanism that would explain every single evolutionary transition, but recognizes that “the actual mechanisms which might explain movement between adjacent forms on the typology need not be the same at every stage of the typology” (Wright, 1983:26–27).

Wright’s characterization of an evolutionary theory is admirably free of the kinds of dubious and gratuitous assumptions that plague Giddens’s definitional effort. As Wright is at pains to point out, his way of identifying an evolutionary theory makes no claim that the typology of social forms represents a teleological unfolding of latent potentialities, nor does it claim that such a typology represents a rigid sequence of stages through which all societies must move. Wright does not even assume that all (or even most) societies necessarily evolve. Retrogression is entirely permitted, and it is fully acknowledged that in most societies “long-term steady states may be more likely than any systematic tendency for movement” (Wright, 1983:26).

Wright thus seems much closer than Giddens to pinpointing the genuinely irreducible elements of evolutionary theories in the social sciences. Indeed, he sets forth perhaps the best characterization of an evolutionary theory available. Accordingly, I shall adopt his formulation as a rough guide for selecting the theories to be included in this book.¹

That brings us, then, to the aims of the book, which are basically twofold. In the first instance, the book attempts a systematic survey of the historical ebb and flow of evolutionary theories in the social sciences from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. More importantly, it attempts a detailed critical analysis of the theories presented, with special attention being given to the explanatory logic underlying the evolutionary formulations they promote. Especially close attention will be paid to whether or not a particular theory is evolutionist or evolutionary (in Toulmin’s sense)² in character, but other crucial aspects of the structure of evolutionary theories will also be explored. These include, but are by no means limited to, such things as the scope of their application, the particular conception of adaptation upon which they rest, whatever tendency they might have to merge progression with progress, the extent to which they admit of exogenous influences on societal change, and their implicit or explicit conceptual linkage with bioevolutionary theories.

It is crucial that it be understood what this book is *not*. Despite a concern with the historical fate of evolutionary theories, the book’s aims are more properly characterized as analytical and critical than as historical. Moreover, even as history it makes no pretense to being an exhaustive account of all the theories that have at one time or another been called evolutionary. No account is given, for example, of those theories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that have often been thought of as evolutionary—the theories emanating from the Scottish and French Enlightenments, or those of Saint-Simon and Comte. And for the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, only the most important thinkers of that period are treated, many others being ignored altogether.

The entire social and cultural context of the theories treated is also ignored. The book therefore makes no claim to be an exercise in the sociology of knowledge: an account of the social and cultural conditions that have helped shape the reception of evolutionary theories by social scientists. This is not because I deem such an exercise to be unworthy. On the contrary, a book written along such lines is badly needed, and one that was judiciously done would constitute a major contribution to social theory and sociological analysis more generally. But this is not such a book, and the reader expecting such will only be disappointed.

The plan of the book is essentially as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the three most important of the nineteenth-century evolutionists: Herbert Spencer, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Edward Burnett Tylor. It explores several aspects of the theories of these thinkers, but its most important contribution is its argument that these evolutionists indiscriminately merged evolutionist and evolutionary conceptions, with the former being dominant.

Chapter 3 takes a look at the sharp reaction against evolutionary theories that began toward the end of the nineteenth century and that lasted until the 1950s. It delineates the major criticisms made during this time against evolutionary theories and attempts to show that these criticisms were largely misdirected.

Chapter 4 examines the evolutionary foundations of classical Marxism, emphasis being placed on the epistemological character of the works of both Marx and Engels. It is claimed that Marx did not have a teleological or unfolding model of historical change and, more contentiously, that Engels very likely did not either. The chapter also explores several other concerns pertinent to the social evolutionism of Marx and Engels, such as the intellectual relationship between Marx, Engels, and Morgan, and Marx's admiration for Darwin.

Chapter 5 examines the work of three other classical evolutionists, L. T. Hobhouse, William Graham Sumner (and his disciple Albert Galloway Keller), and Edward Westermarck. In Hobhouse and Sumner we have two diametrically opposed evolutionary approaches, and in Westermarck we have yet a completely different kind of evolutionist. Like Sumner and Keller, Westermarck drew on Darwin, but in a completely different way; Westermarck was not a Darwinian selectionist, but rather the first real sociobiologist.

Chapter 6 pursues the revival of evolutionary theories in the 1930s and 1940s in the works of the anthropologists V. Gordon Childe, Leslie White, and Julian Steward. Although careful scrutiny of the ideas of these thinkers reveals a number of serious difficulties, they made many significant intellectual gains over most earlier evolutionary theorists and laid the foundations for a solid materialist theory of social evolution.

Chapter 7 begins the discussion of the revival of evolutionary theorizing in sociology by looking at the functionalist and idealist evolutionism of Talcott

Parsons, a version of evolutionism strikingly different from the materialist approaches of Childe, White, and Steward. The chapter seeks to show that Parsons's extension of his more general functionalist model of society to long-term social evolution produced a particularly extreme version of evolutionism highly vulnerable to the leading criticisms of the antievolutionists.

Chapter 8 switches back to anthropology by looking at the next generation of anthropological evolutionists to follow in the footsteps of Childe, White, and Steward beginning in the 1960s: Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, Robert Carneiro, and Marvin Harris. With the exception of Service, who was theoretically eclectic, all were materialists. Harris's evolutionism, despite certain flaws, constitutes the most promising of these versions of evolutionism and is the best foundation on which to build. A coda to the chapter considers efforts on the part of Marxian anthropologists to develop alternatives to these more mainstream anthropological theories of social evolution.

Chapter 9 then returns to sociology. Most of the chapter considers versions of sociological evolutionism very different from Parsonian evolutionism, especially Gerhard Lenski's ecological-evolutionary theory, Jonathan Turner's institutional selectionism, and Turner's and Alexandra Maryanski's provocative normative interpretation of long-term social evolution. I also look at Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall's attempt to formulate a theory of long-term social evolution based on world-system theory. The chapter concludes by looking at two German evolutionists who have followed in the Parsonian tradition, Jürgen Habermas, and his disciple (and later critic) Klaus Eder.

Chapter 10 explores various dimensions of the relationship between evolutionary biology and theories of social evolution. The concepts of adaptation and differentiation (increasing complexity) are discussed as they are employed in biological and social evolutionism. The concept of progress has also been a critical one in evolutionary thinking in both disciplines, and it is explored in some detail. As the chapter will show, all three of these concepts are hotly debated in evolutionary biology just as they are in social evolutionism. I also consider very briefly three kinds of attempts to formulate theories of social evolution in Darwinian terms.

Chapter 11 examines some of the leading objections to evolutionary theorizing still made by social scientists. It recapitulates the major objections to evolutionary theorizing touched on in earlier chapters, and it explores some additional criticisms as well. Because these critics fail to distinguish among markedly different versions of evolutionary theory, their criticisms apply only to some theories and leave others relatively untouched. Therefore, I vigorously defend certain evolutionary theories against these critical attacks.

Chapter 12, the book's final chapter, gives me a chance to present in full the most recent version of my general theory of social evolution, evolutionary materialism, along with evidence to illustrate and support it. The chapter also discusses how and why social evolution is sometimes a retrogressive

and at other times a progressive social force. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the overall quality of life in the main types of social systems that history has revealed to us thus far.

Finally, in an epilogue, I try to explain why the history of evolutionary theorizing shows an interesting pattern of periods of strong endorsement interspersed with periods of strong criticism and aversion. Here I draw on the concepts of Kondratieff waves and hegemony cycles to show that periods of economic boom in which there is a true hegemon in the world-economy are likely to be particularly fervent periods of evolutionism.

Notes

1. Most of the thinkers and theories discussed in the book meet Wright's criteria quite well; a few, though, are perhaps a bit marginal, being evolutionary in a somewhat weaker and more limited way. If one wanted to reduce Wright's definition to an even simpler form, it might be said that the absolutely vital defining characteristic of an evolutionary theory is the provision of a general mechanism or set of mechanisms to account for what are presumed to be at least some general directional sequences of societal change. All of the thinkers discussed in this book meet this weaker criterion.

2. In Chapter 2 different terms will be suggested for this distinction, and after this point the terms evolutionist and evolutionary will be used simply as general descriptive terms having no reference to the technical meanings assigned them by Toulmin.