SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATIONS
A General Theory of Historical Development

Stephen K. Sanderson
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This book is intended to finish the task begun in my *Social Evolutionism* (Blackwell, 1990). In that book, one of my main aims was to clear away a great deal of theoretical debris concerning theories of social evolution. In sketching and critically analyzing the historical development of evolutionary theories I hoped to show that many myths and misconceptions had accumulated in regard to them. I attacked these myths and misconceptions and tried to show that an evolutionary interpretation of world history was both possible and desirable. *Social Transformations* formulates such an interpretation, which I refer to by the name of evolutionary materialism, and applies it to what I regard as the world's most important historical transformations: the Neolithic Revolution, the origin of civilization and the state, and the transformation that ushered in the modern world, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in western Europe and Japan. Since this book's aim is that of articulating and empirically testing a general theory of social evolution, I have had to read extensively in the various literatures of the leading historically minded social sciences, mainly archaeology, history, and historical sociology. Unless one plans to spend the better part of a lifetime on such a project, one can attempt to cope with only so many historical details. Therefore, I hope that specialists in these fields and their many subfields will be tolerant of the inevitable limits of my knowledge of their particular specialty, judging the book in terms of the aim of producing a coherent picture of the general lines of world history rather than subtle and nuanced accounts of specific historical and prehistorical events.

The subtitle of the book, "A General Theory of Historical Development," was chosen in preference to the subtitle considered first
("A General Theory of Social Evolution") because I wish to emphasize that the book is concerned only with the broad outlines of social evolution (parallel and convergent evolution) rather than with divergent evolutionary processes. Nonetheless, the theory developed here may properly be regarded as a general theory of evolution that has applicability to all evolutionary processes.

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I have dedicated this book to Gerhard Lenski, Marvin Harris, and Immanuel Wallerstein, because they are the scholars who have influenced my thinking the most. Lenski first pointed me in the direction of doing sociology in comparative, evolutionary, and materialist terms. Harris then showed how such an approach could be developed in a very elaborate and detailed way. Finally, Wallerstein added a critically important dimension necessary to understanding the development of the modern world, that of the world-system as a single evolving unit.

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A note on chronologies: The expressions “BP,” “BC,” and “AD” are all used in this book. BP, which stands for “Before the Present,” has become standard usage among archaeologists and is used to represent prehistoric dates. BC is most commonly used by historians and historical sociologists and is used when historical rather than prehistoric dates are being referred to. BC dates can be converted to BP dates by adding 2000, BP dates converted to BC dates by subtracting 2000.