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978-0-521-19951-3 - The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection

W. G. Runciman

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THE THEORY OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SELECTION

In *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*, W. G. Runciman presents an original and wide-ranging account of the fundamental process by which human cultures and societies come to be of the different kinds that they are. Drawing on and extending recent advances in neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, Runciman argues that collective human behaviour should be analyzed as the acting-out of information transmitted at the three separate but interacting levels of heritable variation and competitive selection – the biological, the cultural, and the social. The implications which this carries for a reformulation of the traditional agenda of comparative and historical sociology are explored with the help of selected examples, and located within the context of current debates about sociological theory and practice. *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* is a succinct and highly imaginative contribution to one of the great intellectual debates of our times, from one of the world's leading social theorists.

W. G. RUNCIMAN has been a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, since 1971 and of the British Academy, as whose President he served from 2001 to 2004, since 1975. He holds honorary degrees from the Universities of Edinburgh, London, Oxford and York. He is an Honorary Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Preface

The aim of this book is to bring the concepts and methods of current evolutionary theory to bear on the agenda of comparative sociology – that is, on the study of the underlying process by which the human cultures and societies documented in the historical, ethnographic, and archaeological record come to be of the different kinds that they are. Its principal contention is that collective human behaviour-patterns should be analysed as the outwardly observable expression of information affecting phenotype transmitted at three separate but interacting levels of heritable variation and competitive selection – biological, cultural, and social. A neo-Darwinian approach of this kind is by now commonplace in many areas of the more specialized behavioural sciences. But its potential contribution to sociology has hardly begun to be realized.

Since a preliminary formulation of a recognizably selectionist sociology already underlay the trilogy on social theory which I published between 1983 and 1997, this volume might be thought to be no more than a post-script to views which I have already put into print. But my *Treatise on Social Theory* was, as I now recognize, little more than an introductory exposition of its theme. Since it was published, I have not only become increasingly aware of its deficiencies and increasingly indebted to the many other authors on whose contributions to selectionist theory it is now possible to draw, but increasingly conscious of how much still remains to be done before sociology can be said to have moved decisively beyond the agenda set for it by Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. What has not changed as much as it might is the hostility still provoked not only among sociologists but among anthropologists and historians by the extension of the concepts and methods which have proved so successful in the explanation of the evolution of species to the explanation of the evolution of human cultures and societies which is directly continuous with it. Much of this hostility is based on misunderstanding, whether wilful or not, and some of it may reflect a deep-seated

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unwillingness to acknowledge how much of human, as of natural, history is due to chance. But if this book can help to diminish the antagonism which neo-Darwinism still attracts, and thereby encourage sociologists younger and better qualified than myself to carry forward the research programme to which it points the way, its publication will have been fully justified.

My thanks are due to John Davis, who as Warden of All Souls arranged for me to give a series of seminars on these topics at Oxford in the academic year 2002–3; to an anonymous referee for constructive comment on, and criticism of, the penultimate draft; to Ian Hacking for pointing out the weaknesses of an earlier version of the Epilogue; to Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press for his encouragement and help in seeing the book through to publication; to Zeb Korycinska for compiling the index; and to Hilary Edwards for many years of indispensable secretarial assistance.

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