CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

In this concluding volume of his trilogy on social theory, W. G. Runciman applies to the case of twentieth-century English society the methodology (distinguishing reportage, explanation, description and evaluation) and theory of the preceding two volumes. Volume III shows how England's capitalist mode of production, liberal mode of persuasion, and democratic mode of coercion evolved in the aftermath of World War I from what they had been since the 1880s, but did not, in turn, evolve significantly further following World War II. The explanation rests on an analysis of the selective pressures favouring some economic, ideological and political practices over others in an increasingly complex environment which policy-makers could neither predict nor control. This explanation is supported by a graphic account of the changes themselves and of how they were experienced by the different segments of English society.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

A treatise on social theory

VOLUME THREE

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

A treatise on social theory

VOLUME III: APPLIED SOCIAL THEORY

W. G. Runciman, FBA
FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1997

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1997

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 10 on 13 point Ehrhardt by Computape (Pickering) Ltd, North Yorkshire

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 24960 0 hardback
ISBN 0 521 58801 4 paperback

CE

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

A treatise on social theory

VOLUME I: THE METHODOLOGY OF SOCIAL THEORY

1 Introduction: the nature of social theory
2 Reportage in social theory
3 Explanation in social theory
4 Description in social theory
5 Evaluation in social theory

VOLUME II: SUBSTANTIVE SOCIAL THEORY

1 Introduction: societies as subjects for science
2 Social relations
3 Social structure
4 Social evolution

VOLUME III: APPLIED SOCIAL THEORY

1 Introduction: the case of twentieth-century England
2 The case reported
3 The case explained
4 The case described
5 The case evaluated

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

VOLUME III

Applied social theory

© Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

Preface *page* xiii

1 Introduction: the case of twentieth-century England 1

The uniqueness of the case 1
A capitalist mode of production 13
A liberal mode of persuasion 22
A democratic mode of coercion 30
The 'Victorian' legacy 38
Conclusion 54

2 The case reported 56

The pattern of roles 56
Economic evolution 68
Ideological evolution 82
Political evolution 94
Mobility, individual and collective 104
Inter-societal decline 118
Conclusion 126

3 The case explained 127

Selective pressures and institutional constraints 127
Mutations and their functions in the mode of production 138
Mutations and their functions in the mode of persuasion 153
Mutations and their functions in the mode of coercion 163
Adaptive affinities 173
Conclusion 187

4 The case described 189

Authentic experiences and representative biographies 189
Life at the top 200
Upper-, middle-, and lower-middle 212
Workers, more skilled and less 230
Life at the bottom 253
Conclusion 264

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

5 The case evaluated 266

Satisfactions and resentments 266
Material progress 272
Respect and self-respect 280
'Power to the people' 289
Well-being or welfare? 297
Conclusion 303

List of references 304

Index 326

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

Preface

This concluding volume of a trilogy on social theory is not a social history of twentieth-century England, let alone of Britain. Nor is it a sociology of it, if by that is meant a comprehensive account of its structure and culture. It is no more – but also no less – than an application to twentieth-century English society of the substantive social theory advanced in volume II in accordance with the methodology advanced in volume I. It does not, therefore, narrate even in outline the salient events of the period; it does not offer an assessment of the country's economic performance or diagnosis of its relative decline; it does not trace the careers of individual politicians, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, trade-union leaders, grass-roots activists, or anyone else; it has nothing to say about the progress of science or literature or art; and it barely mentions the technological discoveries by which the daily lives of English people have been transformed over the period which it covers. Its concerns are first, to report in outline the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion of English society over the years in question; second, to explain why they have evolved (or not) as they have in response to the selective pressures which have acted on the practices defining their constituent roles; third, to describe what the resultant changes (or the lack of them) were, broadly speaking, like for representative role-incumbents in different systacts[1] and milieux who experienced them; and finally, to assess their impact in terms of the benefit (or otherwise) which they have brought to the persons affected by them by standards generally recognized by those persons themselves and the policy-makers seeking to benefit them.

By now, however, I am inevitably conscious of what I would rewrite if I could in volumes I and II. Although I have no doubts about the value of the

[1] This – the one neologism in the whole treatise – is the term introduced in volume II to stand for clusters of roles similarly located in a three-dimensional social space whose axes correspond to the three forms of power: the economic (hence, mode of production), the ideological (hence, mode of persuasion), and the political (hence, mode of coercion). The need for it arises because no existing sociological term, least of all 'class', is at the same time specific in assigning the designated roles an ordinal ranking relative to other such clusters and neutral between the dimensions in which they are ranked.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

fourfold distinction between reportage, explanation, description, and evaluation expounded in volume I, I recognize that it is by no means as exhaustive as I may have made it appear. Sociologists can and do have many things to say whose illocutionary force cannot be neatly accommodated within it, if at all. They may be refining statistical methods, categorizing social relationships, ruminating about the human condition, championing the oppressed, rewriting the history of sociology, undermining the reputations of rival sociologists, prophesying the future of the world, or even, to quote from the deconstruction by Clifford Geertz (1988, p. 48) of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, 'neither picturing lives nor evoking them, neither interpreting them nor explaining them, but rather arranging and rearranging the material the lives have somehow left behind into formal systems of correspondences'. Nor is it as if this volume has been, or could possibly be, so written that chapter 2 consists entirely of accurately reported sociological facts, chapter 3 entirely of validated explanatory hypotheses, chapter 4 entirely of authenticated descriptions of what 'their' lives have been like for 'them', and chapter 5 entirely of coherent evaluations of England's modes of production, persuasion, and coercion in accordance with 'their' standards. But I now feel more strongly, if anything, than I did that sociologists (and, for that matter, anthropologists and historians) need to do all that they can, and therefore more than they usually do, to make clear to their readers just what kinds of questions about human behaviour they see themselves as answering and just what kinds of conclusions they are therefore trying to persuade their readers to share. Readers of this volume who have not read volume I will, I hope, be able nevertheless to grasp how important to my argument is the difference between reporting what has happened in twentieth-century England, explaining why it has happened, and describing what it has been like for the different groups or categories of English people to whom it has happened – and thus how wide the discrepancy can be between understanding the subjective experience of belonging to a society in a particular role and understanding how that society functions and why it has evolved as it has.

At the same time, I am aware that since volume I was written the notion that there are such things as sociological facts whose explanation can be intersubjectively established has, as it periodically does, become the target of a fresh wave of sceptical and relativist attacks. But 'post-modernism', ironically and therefore appropriately, exemplifies one of the central themes of volume I. If objectivity is unattainable, the doctrines of 'post-modernism' can carry no more conviction than those which it claims to subvert. It does not follow that literary and philosophical reflection about the human condition is without meaning or purpose of its own: 'To acknowledge the genius of Darwin is not to devalue the genius of Nietzsche, or vice versa' (Runciman 1993, p. 22). But it

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

does follow that 'post-modernist' discourse is incommensurable with, and therefore irrelevant to, the discourse in which this volume is written – a discourse in which claims of fact are to be rejected not because they are meaningless but because they are demonstrably false, hypotheses of cause and effect to be rejected not because they are arbitrary but because they cannot stand up to invalidation in the face of the evidence, and descriptions of other people's experience to be rejected not because they are ineluctably self-referential but because they fail the test of authenticity in the terms of those whose experience they purport to convey.

The inadequacies of volume II, as I now see them, are of a very different kind. The one of which I was first made aware is the weakness of its proffered typology of human societies, which is too rudimentary for even the limited function which I claimed for it (Wickham 1991). But if, on the other hand, there is a weakness in its exposition of the theory of social selection, it does not lie in any fatal flaw which has since been pointed out to me in the basic propositions of the theory. I could, as I now realize, have set out more systematically the implications of the idea that social evolution is analogous but not reducible to natural selection, and I could have done more to anticipate the responses of fellow-sociologists still disposed to dismiss it out of hand without any attempt to test those implications against the evidence of the historical and ethnographic record. But I also failed to take proper account of the contributions of other disciplines to our understanding of the evolution of social behaviour patterns in human societies. As seems so often to happen in the history of ideas, I was unaware while writing volume II how many other people were, in different ways, seeking also to work out the implications for the study of human social behaviour of Darwin's insight that evolution comes about, and can only come about, through a process of what he called 'descent with modification'. Now, we have an increasingly clear understanding of what natural selection can and cannot explain directly about human behaviour, and of the analogous process by which cultural differences are transmitted between adjacent or successive human populations.[2] We also know much more than we

[2] There is as yet no agreed term for the objects of cultural selection as there is for the genes which natural selection selects and the practices which social selection selects. But the distinction between the three is unambiguous. Genes are transmitted through biological inheritance from one organism to another. Cultural 'traits' or 'memes' (if that is the word which catches on for units or bundles of information affecting phenotype) are transmitted through imitation or learning from the mind (or brain) of one person to that of another. Practices, which are units of *reciprocal* action, are transmitted through relations of domination or cooperation from one to another pair or larger group of roles. See further my 'Introduction' to the proceedings of the Royal Society/British Academy joint discussion meeting held in 1995 on the evolution of social behaviour patterns in primates and man (Runciman 1996b); and for a sense of how far the conventional wisdoms of the 'Standard Social Science Model' have been undermined by recent

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

did about the ecological and demographic influences which caused the emergence of the distinguishing features of human societies as such. And we can say not only that the evolution of human societies from one distinctive kind to another is a 'Darwinian' process in a sense equally different from what 'Historical Materialists' on the one hand and 'Social Darwinists' on the other have taken it to be, but also that we are no longer, thanks to recent advances in evolutionary and cognitive psychology and the study of artificial intelligence, quite as far as we were from the 'much more nearly adequate understanding of human psychology' whose lack I lamented in the penultimate paragraph of volume II. Sociology is still a long way from achievements comparable to those which in biology have taken Darwin's fundamental contribution forward to a comprehensive theory accounting for both the sources of diversity and the constraints on it which determine the evolution of species. But the ambition does not look quite as unrealistic now as it did when I started writing volume II.

In this volume, I have made no attempt to go back over the ground which was covered in volumes I and II. Their deficiencies, however much I should like to put them right, do not, in my view, significantly weaken the conclusions of this third and final volume about the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion of twentieth-century England. Where those conclusions need to be modified, as no doubt they do, it will be because I have neglected or mishandled some of the relevant evidence, as no doubt I have. The amount of relevant evidence is in any case far more than a single researcher could hope to master, and the secondary literature is growing all the time. As in volume II, I have supplied references where it seems to me that readers are likely to want to ask one or more of the questions 'who did you get that from?', 'what makes you so sure?', and 'where can I go for a little more detail than you have chosen to give?'. But I have not thought it necessary to cite every source which I have consulted, and the list of references covers only a selection of the secondary works on which I have drawn. No more than in volume II could I trace, even if I wanted to, the serendipitous route which has led me to one rather than another part of what a comprehensive bibliography would contain.

I have also, not without hesitation, drawn at some points on my own experience as a participant-observer in what is, after all, my own society. I am well aware of the risks in so doing. But a government census, an anthropological monograph, a sample survey, a contemporary diary, or an independently commissioned research report are not intrinsically more reliable[3] than a

research, see Tooby and Cosmides (1992). Readers unfamiliar with the notion of *cultural* selection are recommended to start with Boyd and Richerson (1985).

[3] Readers of volume I may recall that according to the 1951 census there were in the United Kingdom in that year 2 clergymen, 4 solicitors, 4 doctors, 1 accountant, 10 opticians, 23 chiropodists, and 34 qualified accountants all under sixteen years of age (Marsh 1958, p. 163 n.1).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

recollection of events, processes, or states of affairs witnessed at first hand. Although, as I said in the preface to volume I, it is for my readers and not for me to judge whether I am a better sociologist because I am also a practising capitalist, it remains the case that as a practising capitalist I have both observed and taken part in aspects of the functioning of twentieth-century English society about which I could not have found out as much as I have in any other way. As I have remarked elsewhere (Runciman 1989, p. 14), talking to some of my fellow-sociologists about the workings of capitalism makes me feel as if I were a Trobriand Islander who had wandered into a seminar of Malinowski's. Conversely, talking to some of my fellow-capitalists makes me feel as if I were a mole from an alien culture not yet detected by MI5. But either way, the methodological point is the same one. Where I have mishandled evidence derived from my own participant observation, I deserve to be criticized by criteria no different from where I have mishandled evidence derived from the observations of someone else. This holds equally where, or if, my own moral or political values might be thought to be involved. For reasons set out in full in volume I, this point ought not to need to be argued here at all. Just because many sociologists, whether deliberately or not, allow their explanatory or descriptive conclusions to be influenced by their moral or political attitudes, it doesn't follow either that they couldn't do otherwise or that other sociologists need do so too; and in any case, any claim to have detected a bias of this kind entails a claim that it can be discounted accordingly. It is true that a book such as this one is inescapably personal. No other sociologist who had undertaken the same task would carry it out in the same way, least of all in chapter 4 where it is fundamental, as I argued in volume I, to the distinction between explanation and description that descriptions remain discretionary even after all the evidence is in. But although it does so happen that the picture of English society which the evidence dictates is not what would exemplify my personal ideals, no sentence in this volume would need to be differently written if it were otherwise.

The publication of this volume, which was already behind my original timetable, has been further delayed by my appointment as Chairman of the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice in England and Wales which sat between 1991 and 1993. This further delay has, however, had two advantages. It has significantly increased my knowledge of the workings of a set of institutions central to the mode of coercion of English society; and it has enabled me to draw on recent publications which lend support to my account of the period which this volume covers. For reasons which I touch on at the conclusion of chapter 2, I suspect that 1990 may turn out, like 1880, to be a year which will be used by future historians and sociologists to mark the end, or at least the beginning of the end, of one sub-type of capitalist liberal

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58801-0 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume III: Applied Social Theory
W. G. Runciman
Frontmatter
More information

democracy and thus the beginning of English society's evolution into another. But whether or not this turns out to be so, it has at any rate been helpful to see the years of so-called 'Thatcherism' in retrospect and to be reinforced in the conviction that, as I thought at the time, the systemic (as opposed to merely attitudinal) changes attributed to it by both its enemies and its friends were much exaggerated, just as were the changes attributed by both its enemies and its friends to the Attlee government of 1945–51.

My particular thanks are due to David Lockwood, Ross McKibbin, and Pat Thane, who read the whole of this volume in draft and whose comments and suggestions have been of very great value. Where I have failed to follow their advice (and I sometimes have), the responsibility is entirely mine. I should have liked also to be able to thank by name the many friends and colleagues with whom I have discussed the topics covered by this volume during the years of its composition. But I have not kept any systematic record, and I can only hope that if they read the volume they may here and there recognize traces of their influence. My thanks are due also to Hilary Edwards for long and patient application to it of her word-processing skills. As throughout the whole project since I first conceived it thirty years ago, it would be impossible to exaggerate the debt which I owe to my wife for her support. And I must once again repeat my thanks to the Council of my College for successive renewals of the Senior Research Fellowship without which the project could not have been realized.

Trinity College, Cambridge W. G. R.
May, 1996

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org