

Darwinian Sociocultural Evolution

Solutions to Dilemmas in Cultural and Social Theory

Social scientists can learn a lot from evolutionary biology – from systematics and principles of evolutionary ecology to theories of social interaction including competition, conflict and cooperation, as well as niche construction, eco-evo-devo, complexity, and the role of the individual in evolutionary processes. Darwinian sociocultural evolutionary theory applies the logic of Darwinism to social-learning-based cultural and social change. With a multidisciplinary approach for graduate biologists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, social psychologists, archaeologists, linguists, economists, political scientists and science and technology specialists, the author presents this model of evolution drawing on a number of sophisticated aspects of biological evolutionary theory. The approach brings together a broad and inclusive theoretical framework for understanding in the social sciences which addresses many of the dilemmas at their forefront – the relationship between history and necessity, conflict and cooperation, the ideal and the material and the problems of agency, subjectivity and the nature of social structure.

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There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Charles Darwin, concluding words from the first edition of *The Origin of Species*, 1859.)

Biologists ... appreciate the hugeness of the problem that Darwin faced and solved. They are therefore more likely than social scientists to feel optimistic about the chances of a comparable intellectual feat in the study of cultural evolution. (John Maynard Smith and N. Warren, *Evolution* **36**:3, 620, 1982.)

That there are just two major forms of behavioural evolution, occurring through genetic and cultural transmission respectively, must rank among the most exciting and fundamental discoveries ... achieved over the last century and a half. (Andrew Whiten, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* **24**:2, 359–60, 2001.)

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Preface: a postmodern metanarrative

This book has three goals. This first is to acquaint colleagues in the social sciences and their students who may not be well informed, but who want to become more so, about work currently being done in a variety of social science disciplines on Darwinian theories of sociocultural evolution. These are the readers who, when they hear “cultural evolution”, think “sociobiology”, or even of the kinds of stage theories of “progress” common in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Conversely, life scientists may be interested in the extent to which Darwinian evolutionary concepts and theories are applicable to purely sociocultural phenomena.

The second is addressed to colleagues in either the social or the life sciences and their students who know better and are currently working in this area. I would like them to become aware, to the extent to which they currently may not be, that their labours in their own discipline are supported by, and converging with, those of others, working in virtually every other social science discipline. Together they are building the foundations of a broad and inclusive theoretical framework for understanding in the social sciences. I would also like to encourage an enriched and updated understanding of evolutionary processes beyond the heretofore admittedly useful formulas such as those of replication, variation, interaction and selection many of us have been working within. Today, evolutionary biology has a richer conceptual apparatus to offer sociocultural evolutionists that we need to take advantage of. These include developments in systematics, the emergence of general principles of evolutionary ecology, the role of conflict in a cooperative context and vice versa, niche construction, and an awareness that a truly synthetic theory must embrace not only transmission and selection but also development and ecology if it aspires to explain the evolution of complexity. This is not to say that

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many problems do not remain outstanding – those pertaining to the role of the individual in evolutionary processes for example.

The third is to use the second to inform the first. I would like to show how an enriched understanding of the sociocultural evolutionary process can address many of the dilemmas that are at the forefront of the social sciences today. What is the role of history and contemporary social forces in understanding human affairs? What conditions are likely to result in social conflict or cooperation or both? What about memes? What about rational choice versus reinforcement? Is everything, something, or nothing socially constructed? Where does complexity come from? What is social structure anyway and how does it relate to culture? Is there a role for human agency in a culturally programmed and socially structured world?

Nothing so characterizes the postmodern state of the social sciences as the belief that metanarratives (in the language of the humanities) or general theories (in the language of the sciences) are impossible. At first blush therefore, the title of this preface is a contradiction in terms. Sociocultural evolutionism is most definitely a metanarrative, a general theory. At the same time, however, it is a postmodern one. It does not seek to outcompete, let alone actively destroy, other theories, paradigms, theoretical orientation or schools of thought dealing with human culture and social organization. Rather, it is a framework which respectfully acknowledges fundamental insights of the most diverse sorts and sources about our common subject matter. Evolution acknowledges the significance of both the ideal and the material, change and stability, history and necessity, cooperation and conflict, reason and reinforcement, the subjective and the objective, and hopefully ultimately both the biological and the sociocultural. Evolution is indeed then a *postmodern* metanarrative, a framework within which what we all have to say makes sense. This book is about that metanarrative, that general theory.

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