

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

W.G. Runciman, *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 266pp. \$US 27.99 paper (978-0-521-13614-3), \$US 75.00 hard-cover (978-0-521-19951-3)

W.G. Runciman (Walter Garrison Runciman, 3rd Viscount Runciman of Doxford, Commander of the Order of the British Empire and Fellow of the British Academy) is an historical and comparative sociologist and social theorist. Along with Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer, he is arguably one of the three most distinguished British social theorists of his time. He has a number of honorary degrees including from Oxford, he served as President of the British Academy from 2001-2004, and he is a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. As both an abbreviation and an extension of his three volume *A Treatise on Social Theory* (particularly of the second volume), *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* is a welcome addition to Runciman's corpus.

The book might have more accurately been titled *The Theory of Biological, Cultural and Social Selection* because its central thesis 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” (p. vii). The core of the book is three chapters on each of these in that order.

The book is not deep in its use of the evolutionary model in any of these. While concepts such as homology, analogy, evolutionary game theory, strategy, niche construction, (positive) frequency-dependence, group selection, punctuated equilibrium, gene-meme co-evolution, and so on make their appearance from time to time, others that are important in contemporary evolutionary theory, such as life history theory, and some that evolutionists currently struggle with, such as the relationship between evolution and development (evo-devo) do not. Moreover, I doubt that a naive reader would come away with a very precise understanding of the meaning and use of many of those that do appear. However, the book is broad. Consistent with the author’s intention of suggesting how comparative sociology “should” or “might usefully” be “reconstructed,” almost every page is replete with a rich array of histor-

ical, ethnographic and comparative sociological examples drawn from a lifetime of learning. One might have preferred that fewer of these be developed at more length, which might have made them more memorable, but no mind — my dominant response to that aspect of the book was “Bravo!”

In general, I find more to agree than to disagree with Runciman. However, one issue I do have is the identity of the two variation and selection processes beyond the biological relevant to human behaviour — the psychological and sociocultural as some have it, or the cultural and social, as Runciman and some others have it. Leaving aside the psychological, Runciman insists on a strong distinction between cultural and social selection and equally strongly rejects any use of the concept “sociocultural.” He variously identifies his cultural - social distinction as: memes versus practices (knowledge versus behaviour?); acquired versus imposed behaviour (voluntary versus involuntary?); informal versus formal; reinterpretation versus renegotiation in dyads; and as common in hunting and gathering versus in other kinds of societies. Also, he often speaks of “transitions” from the cultural to the social (historical?).

To keep a long story short, I think this is an issue of multiple levels of sociocultural variation and selection. At times a cultural (i.e., a socially learned) idea and a behaviour that flows from it spreads viral-like in a relatively isolated fashion. Most often however, groups of cultural elements, norms, and values governing behaviour, are transmitted and acquired in packages constituting social roles, statuses or identities. Like organisms with their genes but also with plentiful nucleoplasm, cytoplasm etc., resources other than information are part of these packages — social roles possess resources such as wealth and income, power, and status. In turn, they are commonly organized in formal organizations and institutions, such as those of kinship, religion, politics and economics. The point is that the social is *composed* in part of the cultural, and human culture at least (yes, there are animal cultures) virtually always exists in some socially organized system, at a minimum a kinship one. From the other direction, there would be no reason to deny that to be a member of a culture in the traditional anthropological sense of “the way of life of a people,” is any less a social role, status or identity than any other. These identities are commonly defined in relation to members of other ethno-linguistic groups or even with respect to the rest of nature, as in the word “Inuit” meaning “the people” in Inuktitut. Perhaps Runciman’s own emphasis in Chapter 2 on the theory of the universality of in-group out-group distinctions in human nature explains the persistence of this strong cultural-social dichotomy — loyalty to the tribes of anthropology and sociology respectively. A treaty between these two tribes was signed

in 1958 by Alfred Kroeber, then president of the American Anthropological Association, and Talcott Parsons, then president of the American Sociological Association.

Another issue concerns how the reconstruction Runciman speaks of is liable to look. Will it be composed of “better-validated just so stories” cast in terms of selection of genes, memes and pairs of roles answering questions about “just what is going on here,” as he views it? Or will the change be greater? If evolutionary biology — where the use of phylogenetic methods is revolutionizing our understanding of the relationships among and histories of groups large and small, and the emergence of general principles of evolutionary ecology is revealing that evolution is not solely an historical subject devoid of natural laws after all — is any guide, I suspect the latter but I could be wrong.

Despite some reservations, I recommend this book highly as the mature work of a truly learned scholar — one of sociology’s finest.

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