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The Evolution of Human Sociality: A Darwinian Conflict Perspective

Stephen K. Sanderson

Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland, 2001

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Broad-ranging perspectives uniting biological ecology and human ecology are lacking in the study of the human condition (cf. Kuchka 2001; Redman, Grove and Kuby 2000) and Sanderson's appeal about the fragmented state of sociological theory builds toward a resolution by linking human biology and material existence with behavior and social institutions, continually encouraging the audience to adopt Darwinian thinking or watch the demise of sociology. *The Evolution of Human Sociality* is a fleshing-out of "synthetic materialism" and the epilogue of a revised edition of *Social Transformations* (Sanderson 1999), bringing biology and evolutionary principles to sociology. The book's broad scope is highly admirable, and the attempt to theoretically unite the atomistic sub-disciplines and sub-sub-disciplines of social science is welcome.

The Evolution of Human Sociality may be appealing to instructors of upper level undergraduate sociology and anthropology theory survey courses, as the first half of it presents all major theories of society. Graduate courses in anthropology and sociology could focus on evaluating Darwinian conflict theory and attempting to either build upon it or use its shortcomings to synthesize something anew.

Sanderson's introductory chapter is his synopsis of theory building and philosophy of science. The next several chapters evaluate the effectiveness of the following sociological explanations and their corollaries: functionalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, social constructionism, conflict theory (Marx, Weber), exchange/rational choice, cultural materialism, sociobiology. Sanderson considers the last four of these to be broadly effective theoretical frameworks, and attempts to pull them together into what he calls Darwinian conflict theory (rather than his earlier synthetic materialism), relying most heavily on Marx, Darwin, Weber and Harris. He evaluates each of the aforementioned frameworks individually, his criteria including logical coherence, empirical success, parsimony, explanatory power compared to other theories, and the capacity to provide for new insights and investigation. All of these are sound criteria for evaluating theory, although I find parsimony is often overrated in social science due to parsimony's multiple characteristics and the arbitrariness with which these characteristics are employed.

Sanderson's critiques are not reviews of the literature nor discussions of the particular historical context out of which theories were borne, but involve the application of a given theory to one or two cases to evaluate a framework's utility. As a result, the critiques often appear to create straw men. Sanderson argues for the utility of these theoretical caricatures, because parsimony demands that the barebones and causal relationships of frameworks have maximum explanatory value. The latter half of the book is dedicated to quantitative and qualitative evidence for Darwinian conflict theory for most of the major anthropological categories of study: reproduction, infanticide, demographic

transition, sexuality, sexual violence, gender, incest, residence, descent, marriage, family, food, subsistence, altruism, reciprocity, redistribution, surplus, rise of capitalism, status, hierarchy, politics and war. The most symbolic aspect of human society - religion - is omitted purposefully.

Darwinian conflict theory states that society is socially constructed by individuals who are constrained by the material conditions of human environments. Sanderson does not intend to explain everything nor to exclude all other theories, but to provide a framework under which all social science should work. Population pressure sends everything in motion, forcing individuals to find new ways to biologically, ecologically (technology, economy, etc.) or politically adapt to these material constraints. Adaptation to these environments is adequate rather than maximizing (after Simon 1976), and the collective outcome (social life) may be irrational. Social life may perform functions, but only because of the goals and needs of individuals. Adhering to rational choice theory and this relatively loose form of methodological individualism, Sanderson defines adaptation as an inheritance of social forms that results from a majority of individuals benefiting from/adapting to a new situation; society is the result of individuals attempting to deal with their reproductive, economic and political concerns. Thus, the structure-agency problem is glossed as individuals creating structures within material constraints which then provide contingencies for further agency. This seems to be a feedback process, one with which ecological theorists would be willing to work.

In addition to the agency/structure discussion, the book presents a rudimentary theory of environment. The basic sub-units of human societies are biostructure (biologically based needs/desires), ecostructure ('natural phenomena essential to human biological reproduction and economic production'), structure (institutions) and superstructure (shared 'mental life and feelings'). Causal relationships flow more from biostructure up, but some also flow the other direction. Material causal explanations can be biomaterialist, ecomaterialist or polymaterialist. Change is merely the adaptation of subsequent generations to new circumstances in these sub-units, and stasis is the adaptation of new individuals to the same circumstances. Although macro-level phenomena are explained by micro-level factors, societies are more than just the individuals of which it is comprised.

It is in a footnote to the critique of social constructionism/symbolic interactionism that Sanderson gives insight to how Darwinian conflict theory deals with the symbolic nature of human culture. He finds common ground between the symbolic interactionists' emphasis on social status to the sociobiologists' concern with status used to gain access to mates and resources. However, arguing that culture does not beget culture (in any meaningful sense), *The Evolution of Human Sociality* advocates throwing out the culture concept, hoping that a replacement concept is developed soon. This is a strong position, and one supported by many reasonable points in the book, but the position stems from the maintenance of the idealism/materialism dichotomy, rather than from an apparent attempt to resolve it. This fight against the 'mentalist monkey' (which is on the back of behavioralists) leads Sanderson to embrace domain-specific mechanisms of the brain, thus limiting the evolutionarily-adaptive behavioral repertoire of humans. But it also leads him to focus more on the inherent tendencies of individuals who make up different social groups and less on the mechanisms of societal evolution. Thus, the book ignores already developed frameworks that are vital for understanding cultural transmission (Boyd and Richerson 1985) and the emergence of social institutions (Hallpike 1988). While Darwinian conflict theory may be compatible with these others, group selection and emergent properties remain obstacles to an effective synthesis. The book argues for the analysis of social behavior in a historical context, and details the instinctual (evolutionary) bases for human behavior, but because the mechanisms of cultural transmission and the emergence of social institutions are not thoroughly investigated, the history/evolution problem remains. The book does make impressive use of the Human Relations Area Files for detailing strong correlations between various social institutions, particularly regarding the origin of the state, and it will be important to incorporate these findings into more rigorous models depicting such social change.

The discussion of warfare summarizes a great deal of the framework's levels of analysis and substantive contents. For example, warfare is most highly correlated with homicide and socially organized homicide in bands, tribes and chiefdoms. Thus, internal violence begets external violence, encouraged by inherent ethnocentrism but tempered by tit-for-tat game strategy. Internal violence comes from male competition over access to females and to some extent resources. Beyond this, it is the innate desire for power that propels chiefs of circumscribed polities to compete with one another to control people and resources. States exaggerate this process even further. At the state level, finally, homicide and warfare are negatively correlated because the state suppresses competition between males over females. However, contemporary states do see more large-scale warfare when the proportion of young males to overall

population is high (after Mesquida and Wiener 1996). Contemporary states also see large-scale warfare when economic boom cycles allow for the financing of warfare, but on the other hand frequently see smaller-scale warfare as a result of the evolutionarily selected in-group mechanism of ethnicity/xenophobia.

The discussion of warfare is typical of the book. Segues and parallelisms and logical links allow for the unification of many, quite disparate, theoretical foundations. *The Evolution of Human Sociality* even provides room for a more positive view of human society, citing Kropotkin (1902) and the basic ability to cooperate. Cooperation or reciprocal altruism, for Sanderson, derives from the same rational self-interest and, more particularly, from a domain-specific brain function that helps calculate the costs and benefits of all types of social exchange, whether symbolic or material (after Cosmides and Tooby 1992).

One of the biggest goals of the book is to make sociologists aware of the fact that humans are animals and there are biological bases for many of their behaviors. Several pages are dedicated to why sociobiology is not accepted by many sociologists and anthropologists. Sanderson is miffed as to why even people like sociology's great Weberian Randall Collins and anthropology's great materialist Marvin Harris could not adopt a position like Darwinian conflict theory, since he finds their positions fully compatible with his. While there may be bases for many of Sanderson's arguments, these are rarely explicated as the book vacuously dismisses the critiques of sociobiology, and it presents little critique of the sociobiology framework, except for stating that sociobiology deals best with sex, gender, kinship and family life but not so well with the macro-dynamics of long-term change (which is where Marx and Weber enter the picture).

The defensive tone of the book is occasionally distracting, and sometimes causes insight to be ignored. For example, the author states, "Capitalism has a lot to answer for, but socialism has been an overwhelming failure" (p. 89). This specific statement ignores the potential influence of international relations and the world system in creating an environment for specific economic systems to thrive or perish - despite the fact that a few pages earlier the author lauds Weber for considering the state's international relations. Nonetheless, the book does note the fundamental contradictions within capitalist society that bring us ever closer to economic and environmental collapse, and offers that one solution for understanding this problem may be found by synthesizing the frameworks of behavioral ecology and Marxian/Weberian conflict theory, thus considering ecological competition for resource exploitation along with exploitive relations of production.

Variations of Sanderson's framework and its concepts have long been used by ecological anthropologists. The unique contribution of Darwinian conflict theory, that of detailing behavioral ecology's foundations for the framework, is impressive, and may prove useful for ecological anthropology's interest in the nature of constraints and limiting factors. However, the framework presented by *The Evolution of Human Sociality* does little to address the most fundamental questions in ecological anthropology, which are concerned with the nature of change/stasis and their evolutionary tempo (time scale of evolutionary processes) - what I would consider to be the very heart of Darwinian thinking.

This makes me think that the two objectives of the book, 1) to present the biological bases for social behavior, and 2) to encourage Darwinian thinking, are not one in the same, although the book seems to suggest that they are. The former is substantive, while the latter is largely methodological. Darwinian thinking does not necessitate the adoption of all theoretical stances taken in sociobiology, behavioral ecology, or evolutionary psychology. Nor vice versa. The author is quite convincing that both need to be adopted. Unfortunately, it is the confusion that both must operate together that maintains much of the culture/nature impasse in social science. Nonetheless, social scientists interested in grand theory may want to evaluate Darwinian conflict theory before continuing their own work, particularly because the holes that are left are indicative of where social science theory stands. First, the notion that humans perpetually desire supernatural experience (see Kuchka 2001) is missing, which could account for many aspects of religion and ethnicity that the author admittedly passes over; second, the theory also lacks theorems and models detailing the mechanisms and processes of social and cultural evolution.

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