

Human Institutions: A Theory of Societal Evolution.

By Jonathan H. Turner. Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. 309 pp. Cloth, \$75.00; paper, \$29.95.

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In reviewing any work of Jonathan Turner's, one thing must always be said up front — he is certainly ambitious. One year after the publication of his theory of micro-level interactions (*Face to Face: Toward a Sociological Theory of Interpersonal Behavior*, Stanford University Press, 2002), he is at it again, this time with a theory of macro-level social organization and change. There are few theorists today who can jump convincingly between such disparate levels of analysis, but Turner is certainly among them.

His objective here is to analyze the historical development of the major social institutions: economy, kinship, religion, polity, law, and education. These institutions were of central interest to early sociologists but are now, he argues, largely ignored because of the “mesolevel bias” in contemporary sociology. He explains: “I am trying to revive ‘the Old Institutionalism’ (i.e., functionalism) because ‘the New Institutionalism’ is more about mesolevel processes than macrodynamics. Sociology needs an analysis of institutions, per se, rather than a view of institutions as merely ‘environments’ for organizations.”

Yet Turner's goal is not to raise the ghost of Parsons or of Davis and Moore; in fact, he criticizes the logic of previous functional theorists. While they were on the right track, Turner contends, they missed the mark by thinking in terms of static “functional requisites” rather than dynamic processes. By contrast, Turner seeks to analyze social institutions through an investigation of the fundamental, macro-level *forces* that affect all societies. He argues that these forces — population, production, distribution, regulation, and reproduction — operate in the social world in much the same way as (say) gravity operates in the physical world. His logic is also explicitly evolutionary, in that he maintains that these forces change societies by placing *selection pressures* on them. Faced with these pressures, societies must either adapt or fail. On the face of it, this is a compelling project, especially for researchers who believe that sociology should attempt to be “scientific.”

In developing this theory, Turner relies heavily on the writings of Herbert Spencer, while bringing in supporting insights from other theorists such as Émile Durkheim and Gerhard Lenski. Along with many figures and tables, he formally outlines his basic propositions using “quasi math” equations, which show in detail the relationships between key elements of larger processes. This is helpful, since it allows a level of clarity not often attained in sociological theory.

After laying out the theory, Turner spends the rest of the book exploring the ways in which these macrodynamic forces lead to the origin and evolution of social institutions. He traces their development thorough various types of societies, from hunter-gatherer to postindustrial. The analyses are complex, yet accessible, and shed considerable light on how seemingly unrelated processes can work together to create and alter the fundamental fabric of society. The wealth of previous research that the author mobilizes to make his case is quite impressive.

Despite these strengths, however, the book contains some weaknesses that at least partially undermine the book's goals. Foremost among these lies in the author's attempt to move from "functional requisites" to "forces." While this shift sounds promising, the language of the arguments often belies the functional requisites lurking just below the surface. For example, the description of the "force" of production begins: "In order to survive biologically, humans must gather resources from the environment and convert them into usable commodities that sustain life." This sounds a lot like a functional requisite. Sometimes Turner's desire to use the new language results in awkward sentences, for example: "Regulation generated selection for polity and law as a means to coordinate and control the larger population." Isn't this the same thing as saying "larger populations need to be regulated, so polity and law develop"? Functional requisites appear to be alive and well.

For some brave readers, however, this will not be a problem. Those who have overcome their anti-Parsons indoctrination (by reading him, perhaps) will find that this book has a lot to offer our understanding of macrosociology. Turner's main contribution is that he allows functional requisites to vary in importance with environmental and social factors. This is indeed a vast improvement over "vulgar functionalism." His analysis of the importance of population dynamics in institutional evolution is also an important contribution. Moreover, many of his propositions are actually testable — which is always an unexpected pleasure in theoretical work. In short, though this is by no means a perfect book, it is a worthy effort both to revive institutional analysis and to put scientific macrosociology on a solid footing. Despite its flaws, it deserves to be read, understood, and argued with.