

The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection. By W. G. Runciman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. viii+257. \$27.99.

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W. G. Runciman wants to turn us all into Darwinians, but perhaps not in the way that you think. Biological explanations for just about everything are ubiquitous these days but *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* has little to say about behavioral genetic explanations of individual difference or evolutionary psychological accounts of human universals. Though it departs from a framework developed in biology, it soundly rejects the “ultra-Darwinian” idea that “cultural and social se-

lection [are] reducible to natural selection" (p. 8). Wary readers should rest assured that this is very much a work of *sociological* theory.

In his own words, Runciman's goal is "not so much to defend selectionist theory against its critics as to suggest how the agenda of comparative sociology should be reconstructed in its terms" (p. 3). The urge to interpret cultural and social change through the lens of Darwin's idea of "heritable variation and competitive selection" (p. 2) is, of course, hardly novel. "Darwinian" approaches to social science abound today as they have since the days of Herbert Spencer. The real contribution of *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* is thus not the originality of its "big idea" but rather the precision and clarity with which it the idea is developed.

One of the main obstacles to a selectionist sociology has been figuring out what, exactly, is being selected. In natural selection, of course, genes are what allow some heritable variations to persist and others to be selected out by environmental forces. Richard Dawkins and others have used the term "meme" to designate the unit of cultural selection. This terminology, however, has been plagued by lack of precision and the "meme" designation has been used to cover beliefs, behaviors, norms, stories, and anything else that is left over after excising the biological.

Runciman improves upon this by differentiating his key concepts much more precisely. Most central to his argument, he distinguishes between cultural and social selection, with *memes* ("packages of information") encoding cultural information and *practices* (rules that "define mutually interacting institutional roles") encoding social information (p. 3). The former are informally acquired through imitation and learning while the latter are acquired similarly but are formally imposed and reinforced by social sanctions. He also separates memes, as causes, from their "extended phenotypic effects" (p. 58), arguing that we must pay attention to the meanings that memes have for those who hold them if we want to understand how they cause behavior. To take an example from the book, hand washing before meals in a society should not be understood as the effect of a "wash-your-hands-before-eating" meme, but of a meme that encodes beliefs about the transmission of germs or the ritual purity of the in-group. Distinctions like these provide a more powerful set of tools for analyzing the back-and-forth dynamics of cultural and social change than the evolutionary analogy alone or the overworked meme.

The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection is also laudable for its many departures from the natural selection analogy. Rather than trying to shoehorn every sociological mechanism into the biological analogy, Runciman freely notes a multitude of ways in which the comparison breaks down. For example, memetic and institutional "mutations" can be passed along in real time through imitation and learning, not just during discrete moments of reproductive transmission. Memes and practices can also be transmitted via their behavioral effects, which can encode the memes that produced them. Nothing like these processes is at work in natural selection, but, Runciman argues, this does not make cultural and

social evolution less authentically selectionist than biological evolution; all are cases of a more general selectionist theory with mechanisms and processes appropriate to their type.

Throughout the book, the author illustrates the theory with brief comparative and historical case studies, including the French Revolution and the development of capitalism in Europe. These suggest the model's applicability to a wide range of questions. They also reinforce Runciman's point that evolutionary theories need not be—indeed must not be—teleological. Although some evolutionary theories (including Marx's historical materialism) have posited a dominant evolutionary path for all societies, Runciman eschews the search for any lawlike generalizations about societal trajectories. His theory posits no “stages” through which societies inevitably pass but acknowledges that societal evolution is an essentially contingent process whose outcomes cannot be known *a priori*.

Overall, the book's argument is clear, precise, and compelling, though of course it has some flaws. For example, Runciman seems to waffle about the importance of the intentions of cultural and social entrepreneurs, downplaying their significance at the beginning of the book but allowing for both “intentional and unintentional design” in later chapters (p. 140). I also found the author's interpretations of Weber's Protestant ethic thesis and his “ideas-as-switchmen” metaphor to be somewhat tendentious. They seemed pressed into service in order to create contrasts with Weber that were more stark than necessary.

But as someone who would not have considered himself an “evolutionary” sociologist, I found myself agreeing with the vast majority of the book's argument. But I worry that its style of argumentation might limit the extent to which the memes it contains will influence the practices of 21st-century sociology. Though up-to-date on the evolutionary literature, the book seems strangely disconnected from contemporary sociological research. For example, though there is a single approving reference to Bourdieu, Runciman could have done much more to connect his theory with contemporary work in cultural sociology. The “schemas” and “frames” studied by contemporary cognitive and cultural sociologists are like Runciman's memes in that both encode “beliefs about how the world works” (p. 99). Similar parallels might have been drawn with developments in organization theory, social psychology, and other subfields. Connections like these would have made the book's reasoning more resonant with the habitus of many contemporary sociologists and helped them realize that selectionist theory is not a world away from what they are doing already. This would have given the book better odds in the selection environment of today's sociology.

I hope that my analysis of the book's odds is incorrect, however, because I am persuaded that it has a lot to offer almost every sociological researcher. I especially recommend it to researchers who study the dynamics of cultural and institutional change. If my experience is any guide, those who put the extra effort into making connections between Runciman's

argument and contemporary sociological research will find intellectual rewards that will sharpen their thinking and give them new insights into debates in their own field of study.