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your university library, but the hard cover is already out of print. It is available in paperback for $15, but with only half the book usable, might not be the best choice as a supplement for a sociology of religion course, though it could be considered for an undergraduate course in South Asian religion, supplying some usable general information, a few colorful examples, and specialized articles that challenge the teacher if not the student.

Matthew Melko


We have entered a new stage in civilizational studies, if recent research and thinking by such as Frank and Gills, Chase-Dunn and Hall, and Sanderson are as eye-opening as appears to me to be the case. Apparently I am not alone in this opinion, as Albert Bergesen thinks we are experiencing a Kuhnian paradigm crisis. The “Big Picture” is what has always held great attraction for me. I pursued graduate training in geography because it provided a comprehensive and comprehensible approach to the entire planet Earth. I looked to Marxism to provide a broad understanding of human society, but gradually became appreciative of its several serious shortcomings. I supplemented my geographic interests by tapping into sociology, anthropology, and history, while seeking a more realistic (and sufficiently broad and comprehensive) conceptual frame of reference replacing Marxism and its antiquated competitors. In this search, I was drawn to the ISCSC with its breadth of concerns, topical and temporal. Consequently recently scholarly approaches which focus on societal evolution and world systems have come to my attention. These seem to me to lay the foundation, or provide the framework, for significant progress in our understanding of the human experience all the way from Sumer and Egypt and their first cities and states to the present. As an unabashed generalist gathering insights and information from diverse sources, I am quite dependent on the specialists

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and respect their devotion to detail greatly, but all that careful diligence produces little of value for me unless the details thus garnered can be meaningfully placed in some general conceptual structure. No Big Picture is ever completed or perfected, but without one I am lost among profusions and cacophonies. Micro and macro as well as medial scales of research are all essential to our quest for understanding, but my preferred scale remains that of the macro, despite postmodernist disdain of "meta-narratives."

The focus of this paper is Stephen K. Sanderson's ambitious Social Evolutionism: A Critical History, which accomplishes the task the author set for himself, to wit: "the book before you will survey the broad range of evolutionary theories in the social sciences, compare and contrast them to each other, and critically examine their logical and epistemological foundations" (xvii), and so it does. It is "a critical history, not a critical history." (p.7)

He begins with the classical evolutionists, Spencer, Morgan and Tyler, followed by a chapter devoted to the anti-evolutionary views of Franz Boas & Co., and then a chapter on Marxism in relation to evolutionary thinking. This is followed by a critical discussion of V.G. Childe, Leslie White, and Julian Steward, and a chapter dissecting the views of Talcott Parsons. After Boas, Childe, White and Steward represented an "evolutionary revival."

Evolutionary thinking among anthropologists since 1960 constitutes chapter 7, followed by a chapter carefully exploring the relationship (and lack of!) of biological and social evolutionism. The penultimate chapter deals with the criticisms of evolution by Mandelbaum, Nisbet and Giddens. The book closes with a brief statement entitled "Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Sociocultural Evolution" with a nine-point general guide as to what such a theory needs and should avoid. This leaves one eager for his next book.

Sanderson's practice of including pertinent quotations from the writings of the scholars whose views he is analyzing is a very useful characteristic of his work, and his mastery of the relevant literature is impressive. Sanderson realized, in the 1970s, that evolution was not only a hotly contended idea, but was plagued with vagueness and markedly different meanings among those who had entered the lists for or against it. I, for one, am thankful for his exploration and analysis. He has provided a much-needed,
systematic treatment of the complex arguments and contradictory claims associated with social evolution.

My introduction to the question was heavily influenced by political theory, with which Sanderson is not concerned. Radical political theorists have devoted generations of effort in defense of revolutionism or reformism. Perhaps with a more sociological view of history, and less investment in Marxist polemics, they might have noticed that the prevalent mode of change in human societies is one of almost imperceptible, or at least minor, modifications over long periods of time (to wit, reform, or evolution) with revolution — rapid, abrupt changes — occurring rarely and never accomplishing the total restructuring of society that the revolutionaries had expected. This use of “evolutionary,” meaningful for me, especially in the past, is, of course, not what Sanderson has in mind. He is thinking at a different scale in a different context, where evolution refers to major structural changes.

This raises many questions which it is not practical to explore in this paper, alas: questions of teleology and its relation to directionality, to unilinearity and multilinearity, exogenous versus endogenous sources of change, reification, reductionism, and several others, all of which receive Sanderson's careful attention.

Sanderson devotes significant effort to disabusing his readers of the presumed connection of progress and evolution. I am not quite certain as to why he wants an “absolute” measure of improvement before accepting the concept “progress.” Or why there should be “steady human progress” to legitimate the use of this term. Perhaps my problem is that too much has been loaded onto this word. Of course, there has not been steady progress. Of course, progress in one aspect of human life cannot be generalized to the totality of human life. Of course, too, value judgments cannot be avoided. Like most Westerners, I am not a fatalist, and if deprived of the hope of progress, of improvement, in at least some aspects of life, the value of life itself is diminished. Be that as it may, contentious “progress” is, I must reluctantly agree, to be excluded from discussions of evolution.

I do question, however, Sanderson's insistence that change-agents are always individuals and not collectivities. To be sure, there has been entirely too much written in a reified style — “The working class acted...” “Germany responded...” “Iroquois society
...needed..." and the like. Such high-order abstractions are not operational units and therefore cannot DO anything. However, few individuals, acting on their own, decide much of anything of significance. Anyone who has served on a committee, whether the Board of Directors of a corporation, or a jury, or the leadership circle of a voluntary association (the list of examples could be extended ad nauseam) has participated in collective decision-making. It does not follow that the group decision was identical in all particulars to the decision of individual group members had they decided entirely on their own and not in concert. And such collective decisions are real and have real consequences. Fortunately, "Have we evolved or not, and how?" does not hang on Sanderson's autonomous, monadic change-agents.

The question of societal evolution — what meaning shall we assign to this term? — how inclusive is it? how helpful? — is basic, for civilizationists cannot avoid the puzzle that societal dynamics presents. Hence the "rise and fall" theories, the "stimuli and responses," Sorokin's ideational stages, and the Marxist "motor of history." Sanderson, in this volume, does not provide the magic solution, but he certainly puts our feet firmly on the ground as far as societal evolutionary concepts are concerned.

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NOTE


Carroll Quigley. The Evolution of Civilizations

"In the beginning was The Word," we are told, but fond as I am of words, I doubt that very much. However, to begin a comment on Carroll Quigley's The Evolution of Civilizations (1961), I need first to present "the Word" on geography as I have perceived it.