



Book Review

Evolutionary Interpretations of World Politics edited by William R. Thompson. London: Routledge, 2002. ISBN 0-415-93059-6 pp. 352.

Reviewed by Thomas E. Dickins

This edited book is the outcome of a 1998 conference about the application of evolutionary theory to understanding international relations (IR) within political science. The text is organised into four sections: (1) Central Paradigmatic Questions About Interpretation – which looks to discuss the core concepts at work when applying evolutionary theory to IR, and what this approach might displace or replace; (2) Bridges to Other Perspectives – which discusses possible syntheses between evolutionarily inspired approaches and others within IR studies; (3) Applications to Conflict and Cooperation; and (4) Applications to International Political Economy.

The book is very much for political scientists, not behavioural scientists, but this is not to say that it has no interest for the latter camp. Indeed, for anybody specifically concerned with the evolution of social processes and issues to do with human agency and its effect upon, and generation of contingent adaptive problems, then this is an interesting collection of papers. Various analyses of IR politics are presented and given varying degrees of evolutionary treatment, from what Modelski (in Chapter One) terms *extra light* discussion,

which is no more than a hand-wave to terminology, to *heavy* revision which aims to apply a wholesale evolutionary rubric. All of these papers provide issues to think about, and many provide indications of persistent patterns in human behaviour.

In spite of the intrinsic interest of the topic, the book as a whole might leave evolutionary behavioural scientists mildly perplexed by some of the expressions of evolutionary theory found throughout. At times one might even feel that the book was written before the “watershed” of evolutionary psychology which can perhaps best be back-dated to the end of the 1980s. Evolutionary psychology does receive one detailed discussion from Falger, in his chapter (Two) entitled *Evolutionary World Politics Enriched*, in which he argues that knowledge of human nature from this source is essential both for grounding higher-level theories of politics and for brokering parsimony decisions about these theories. There is no sense in which Falger presents a critical review of the studies he chooses to cite, and it would be a tall order to ask that of him alone, but I was surprised not to encounter more discussion in the book about the core notions of human nature

coming from the psychology literature, especially as much of political science adheres to particular, albeit often implicit notions on this matter. Nonetheless, a case could be made that research activity within IR will lead to an explicit view at some point in the future, and a certain amount of theory independence might be desirable lest a consilience appears forced.

The central focus of the book seems to be that of change – evolution as a process that introduces novelty into the world – and the authors wish to explain political change over time with reference to this process. As such this represents an exercise in understanding one aspect of cultural evolution. Thompson refers to this focus in the Introduction:

For many people, evolution and change are completely interchangeable terms. If that is all that is involved here, we would be talking about a vocabulary for analyzing world politics, as opposed to a new paradigm for its analysis. (p. 4)

He then goes on to introduce the concepts of environmental change; innovations in response to this change, which he likens to mutations within biological evolution; variation; and selection. Fitness, under this model, is related to the ability and readiness to accept innovations within a given context, and as such Thompson is tacitly giving a definition of adaptedness and adaptation. So, Thompson is alluding to a precise account of change that is minimally analogous to biological evolution.

In Chapter Eight, Thompson gives more detail on his view of change:

... the attractions of evolutionary interpretations will be highly constricted if we cannot break free of the biology-inspired notion that agents simply respond to environmental change through blind mutation, variable rates of reproductive success, and natural selection... For evolutionary perspectives to be successful in ... (IR),

we need to be able to deal with evolution at several levels of analysis and temporal frames. (pp. 218-219)

Thompson is concerned not only to understand change over historical time but also the role of decision-makers in the short-term and their contribution to this historical change. He sees this latter problem as one for cognitive modellers as well as for those interested in finding out what environmental changes might precipitate strategy shifts (particularly in conflict situations, which is his focus), all of which makes good sense. However, I suspect that Thompson is setting up a straw man in this rather polemical passage. No one in the behavioural sciences, not even the staunchest evolutionary psychologist, has ever thought that behavioural flexibility and its obvious advantages are to be discounted. The whole project of such enquiry is to think about how such responsiveness to short-term, immediate change could be instantiated within the species. Most behavioural scientists operate a phylogenetic taxonomy of creatures beginning with simple hardwired organisms, running through varieties of learning ability to complex representational creatures such as ourselves (see, for example, Dennett, 1995) and argue that the higher-order cognitive capacities of recent evolutionary invention must interact with the more “instinctive” dispositions bequeathed by more ancient adaptive histories. What is more, there is an increasing sensitivity to the effects that our acts upon the environment have upon us and how cultural change can be seen in this light (see, for example, Plotkin, 2002). In short, the behavioural sciences are well aware of this complexity and have been in the business of dealing with it for some time. If Thompson is railing against particular political scientists he perhaps ought to have made that clear.

Cultural evolution is very much at the centre of Patrick's paper on *The Evolution of International Norms* (Chapter Six). He begins with a discussion of cultural evolution, includ-

ing memetics, and argues that although the concept of memes is good one it is too simplistic to cover all the ground. What is needed is a view of human intervention and interaction with memes, for humans appear to exert deliberate control over their cultural environment. Here we do see an emphasis upon the underlying cognitive capacities of the agents involved, and Patrick cashes this out in terms of the interaction between norms (which he defines as a subset of particular memes) and (in IR terms) the state practices of the time; in other words, behaviour. Change over time in state practices can then be understood as a function of the “norm pool”, and understanding how this changes and how state practice might feedback into this pool is critical.

Norms are the ideational unit of inheritance and they are subject to variance through a number of processes including innovation, learning by experience and external influence. All of these processes are distinctly psychological in flavour. What is more, argues Patrick, the transmission of norms is heavily influenced by subjective evaluation of their content and function; it is not a simple process of imitation but one of emulation. This introduction of a psychological element is reflected in the selection processes that Patrick argues operate over norms. These processes are (1) natural selection by consequences; (2) rational choice according to putative consequences; (3) learning; (4) social power or hegemonic socialization; and (5) selection according to appropriateness relative to extant ideals. Patrick’s main hypothesis, then, is that we can account for much of the change we see in international behaviour through an analysis of “normative selection” which is the product of these five processes

(which are not to be seen as necessarily discrete). This represents a *heavy* evolutionary rubric, and one that is quite satisfying. Although there was no commitment to particular models of the underlying (and evolved) psychological dispositions that might have led to normative selection the theory is laid out in such a manner as to welcome it, for it has noted some persistent patterns of social behaviour.

Patrick’s chapter is characteristic of the book’s aim to discuss evolutionary analysis and interpretation of IR. The book does not set itself the lofty goal of explanation, with all its connotations of predictive utility and falsifiability (although see Modelski’s discussion of consilience) but this should not be seen as a weakness. Although I would have liked more reference to the behavioural sciences this book is perhaps best read as a call to arms for evolutionary psychologists to relate their work to the broader models of political change outlined here.

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References:

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