

Gerhard Lenski**Ecological-Evolutionary Theory: Principles and Applications**

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Gerhard Lenski is one of a handful of sociological theorists who maintained an evolutionary perspective on macrosociology through the vicissitudes of theory in the second half of the twentieth century. Some others (with representative publications) include Walter Runciman (1989), Stephen Sanderson (2001), Jonathan Turner (2003) and to a limited extent Niklas Luhmann (1995). They are a distinguished group — Lenski himself was a recipient of the ASA's distinguished career award, Runciman was president of the British Academy in 2002-3, Turner was editor of the ASA's journal *Sociological Theory* for some years, and the late Niklas Luhmann's reputation speaks for itself. This is not to imply that they wholly agree with each other. Lenski accuses Sanderson of misrepresentation (p. 224) and does not even cite Runciman or Turner. In any event, after some ten editions of his macrosociological text, *Human Societies*, in recent years co-authored with Patrick Nolan, Lenski has now published a book setting forth his mature theoretical views.

The theoretical heart of the book is Part I on principles. (Part II on applications includes case studies of ancient Israel, the rise of the west, trajectories of development among different kinds of societies, and the failure of Marxist experiments, and Part III is an epilogue). While he includes a chapter on the biological foundations of human societies, this material plays little role in the rest of the book; i.e. Lenski, like these other theorists, is no sociobiologist. Social and cultural phenomena are at the centre of their interest. He somewhat ambivalently claims both continuity and discontinuity with classical nineteenth and early twentieth century evolutionism; his views are a revival and new at the same time. I agree with that assessment. Lenski has one foot in the old evolutionism and one foot in the new.

This requires some explanation. There is no shortage of "new" sociocultural evolutionism. The literature is self-consciously Darwinian or neo-Darwinian in employing concepts and methods from the life sciences, employed not in the biologically reductionist sense, but in the sense that transmission, variation and selection are viewed as the heart of all evolutionary processes. Sociocultural evolutionism of this type has been bubbling its way up from the bottom in a host of specialized fields in the social sciences including linguistics, archaeology, science and technology studies, memetics and the study of organizations and economic institutions. Lenski obviously shares similar aspirations for a "new" evolutionism. "Sociology today desperately needs a 'map' of the total universe of human societies, not unlike the taxonomic 'map' of the universe of species that biologists have developed since the days of Linnaeus" (pp. 81-2). However, he frequently lacks the conceptual and methodological tools required, and that others have borrowed from the life sciences to begin to achieve it. For example, his classification of societies into hunting and gathering, herding, horticultural, fishing, agrarian, maritime and industrial is obviously typological rather than phylogenetic and the lack of familiarity with evolutionary methods of classification is evident in the use of the term "taxons" rather than "taxa" for the plural of "taxon" (p. 87). On the ecological rather than the historical side, the characteristics of the biophysical environment he distinguishes such as semiarid, arid and desert; cultivable land unsuited to plow cultivation; cultivable land suited to plow

cultivation; and marine environments are crude relative to the density, heterogeneity, scale, etc. familiar to evolutionary ecologists. Thirdly, there seems to be an expectation that the taxonomic and the ecological should coincide when the opposite is the case in the modern evolutionary paradigm. The weight of history and the forces of selection are competing explanations so that geography and ecology create differences among groups within an historically related taxon.

There is another side to this story, however. The new evolutionists for the most part have avoided tackling the kinds of really macro questions about entire societies that interest Lenski and other macrosociologists (but see Mace & Holden 2005, Mace Holden & Shennan 2005). In part, this has been for a good reason. Sociocultural selection of various kinds acts within societies to be sure, but societies are not in the business of making more little societies, and differential replication or transmission lies at the heart of evolutionary processes. However, viability selection (as opposed to that based on differential replication) is a perfectly good form of selection — it was almost certainly the earliest form of selection in the history of life, and we have probably underestimated the degree of complexity it can create. Lenski understands this; his intersocietal selection is based on viability. “Societal survival has been largely a function of a society’s level of technological advance relative to the societies with which it has been in competition” (p. 115-16). Indeed, one of Lenski’s strongest themes, what he calls “the great paradox”, is that on his reading of history, continuity has largely prevailed within societies but change has largely prevailed among them. Wright (2004) and Diamond (2005) have recently reminded us, if we ever even really knew, that human societies truly are not only born, grow and change — sooner or later all of them also die. Perhaps then it is time, having escaped the wasteland of the exclusive developmentalism of Spencer and Parsons, and having acquired a firmer grasp on the nature of evolutionary processes, for the new evolutionists in a variety of specialized fields and macro theorists like Lenski to make common cause in the interests of achieving the dream of a truly evolutionary social science. Both have much to offer.

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