

## ***Review Essays***

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### **Review of Robert L. Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology: A Critical History***

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Robert Carneiro is one of the leading anthropologists of his generation and probably the leading anthropologist of the last half century advocating an evolutionary approach to the study of culture and social life. He made his reputation through a series of articles on cultural evolution, on the Kuikuru of the Amazon, and, most significantly, on the basis of a theory of the origin of the state that has become in all likelihood our best-known theory of that issue. Until the 1990s, Carneiro had written no books, except for a coedited work that assembled some of the articles and essays of his old mentor Leslie White (Dillingham and Carneiro 1987). Then in 2000, he produced his first real book, *The Muse of History and the Science of Culture*, in which he set forth a general theory of cultural evolution and opposed it to the traditional modes of thought of historians.

Now he has produced yet another important book, which, as the subtitle announces, is less a theory of his own than a critical historical dissection of the evolutionary theories of others. Like all of Carneiro's work, it is written in extremely clear, highly accessible prose without the slightest bit of pretentiousness, and reading it is a real pleasure. The book is wide in range and long in scope. It starts with the early evolutionists, mostly Spencer, Tylor, and Morgan, looking at their views on a wide range of issues: rectilinearity vs. unilinearity, stage skipping, rates of evolution, the relationship between diffusion and evolution, and the main causes of the evolutionary process.

It then goes on to look at the strong reaction against evolutionism that began in American anthropology around the turn of the twentieth century and that lasted, by Carneiro's estimate, until 1959. Carneiro chooses this date because it was the year of the Darwin centennial and coincided with a regeneration of interest among anthropologists in the concept of evolution, both biological and cultural. During the first four decades of the twentieth century anthropology was dominated by Franz Boas and his colleagues and students. This was a period not only of antievolutionism, but of considerable antagonism to theoretical generalizations of any type. Carneiro not only discusses Boas and the Boasians, but the diffusionists W. H. R. Rivers, G. Elliot Smith, and William J. Perry, and also the functionalist antievolutionists Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Malinowski was the more antievolutionist of the two, for he 'never cast a benevolent eye on evolutionary reconstructions carried out on a large scale' (p. 82), whereas Radcliffe-Brown at least gave lip service to evolutionary reconstructions and even once referred to himself as an evolutionist (even though he never actually *practiced* evolutionism). During this long period evolutionism did not disappear altogether. There was the evolutionary work of James Frazer; of Hobhouse, Wheeler, and Ginsberg; and of the sociologists William Graham Sumner and his student Albert Keller. But the work of these evolutionists constituted 'but flickering candles, unable to resist the strong antievolutionary winds that were now blowing over the anthropological landscape' (p. 96). Carneiro's assessment of this period is extremely negative: 'Thus by the mid-1920s, with the virtual extinction of cultural evolutionist – and indeed of any robust form of theorizing – anthropology had fallen deep into a Dark Age' (p. 96).

The year 1959 was not only the time of the Darwin centennial, but also the year in which Leslie White published his *The Evolution of Culture*. White of course, was Carneiro's mentor, and a former Boasian antievolutionist who came to react strongly against what he was taught and ended up becoming a leading champion of evolutionary theorizing. Thus was an 'evolutionary revival' born. However, White started his attempt to revive evolutionism as early

as 1939, when he presented a paper endorsing an evolutionary approach at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. White took the lead in the 'struggle to rehabilitate evolutionism', a struggle that was 'a long and painful one for him' because he was constantly under attack by evolutionism's foes. V. Gordon Childe and Julian Steward were the other major figures in the evolutionary revival. Carneiro also refers to an article published in the *American Anthropologist* in 1955 by Kalvero Oberg. This article distinguished seven types of sociopolitical organization in the societies of South America. The article was not openly evolutionist, but according to Carneiro it was 'bursting with implicit evolutionism' and had a major impact on anthropology. Other important works in the revival of evolutionism were Marshall Sahlins's *Social Stratification in Polynesia*, published in 1958, and Walter Goldschmidt's *Man's Way*, published the following year. Evolutionism was on its way back.

Two middle chapters deal with issues in midcentury evolutionism, features of the evolutionary process, and the question 'What drives the evolution of culture?' Here Carneiro discusses general vs. specific evolution, history vs. evolution, the emergence of evolutionary thinking within archaeology, the importance of Elman Service's sequence of evolutionary stages, Carneiro's own use of scale analysis as a method in the study of cultural evolution, increasing complexity as the key defining characteristic of evolution, rates of evolution, and the limitations of Darwinian models of cultural evolution (e.g., as formulated by Boyd and Richerson, Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, Durham, and Rindos). Carneiro's discussion of this last issue is especially impressive and corresponds extremely well to my own thinking. Regarding Boyd and Richerson, he points out that their theory really focuses on fine-grained, microevolutionary details and avoids almost totally a consideration of the grand sweep of cultural evolution, which is of course Carneiro's main concern. (It is mine too. Years ago I had a running email debate with Richerson on precisely this point and took precisely the position that Carneiro takes. Richerson never understood my point and I got nowhere. I made this point in print in my book *Social*

*Evolutionism: A Critical History* [1990]). Carneiro also takes issue with the Darwinian argument, proposed by Donald Campbell, David Rindos, and others, that cultural evolution depends on the natural selection of *random* variation. As Carneiro points out, this is extremely dubious (p. 177):

In order to stick to a strictly Darwinian view of evolution, Rindos argues that the cultural counterpart of mutations – inventions – must also be random and undirected. And here he is stepping hip deep into quicksand. He would have us believe, against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that inventions are essentially random. To be sure, some inventions are, in part at least, serendipitous. But to a large extent invention is a *directed* process, with well-recognized objectives being consciously pursued...

Rindos is on an equally slippery slope when he contends that it is only the ‘undirected generation of new traits’ that ‘permits an authentic Darwinian cultural evolutionism’. Really? Are we to believe, then, that if a particular cultural variation did *not* originate randomly but was, from the start, directed toward a specific objective, that natural selection could not operate on it? How can a trait be declared immune from natural selection purely on the basis of its origin?

Again, this view is almost identical to the view I laid out in my 1990 book on theories of social evolution.

In Chapters 9 and 10 Carneiro discusses the extremely important question of the key causal forces in cultural evolution. He reviews the old debate between Elman Service and Marvin Harris in which Service declared ‘*down with prime movers!*’

Carneiro's view is that all causes cannot really be considered equal and he has always cast his lot with the materialist causal assumptions of Harris. Like Harris, Carneiro sees ecological and, especially, demographic factors as important causal conditions. Population pressure is a major part of his famous theory of the origin of the state, and of cultural evolution more generally. But unlike other cultural materialists, Carneiro gives warfare a major role in cultural evolution, the rise of the state in particular. And, of course, environmental circumscription is given a major role in state

origins. Carneiro examines some of the recent attempts to revive ideology as a major determinant of evolution and rejects them, wisely so in my judgment. He also looks at recent variants of Marxist evolutionism, which he rejects for their overwhelming emphasis on political rather than scientific concerns, and the curious tendency of some versions, such as structural Marxism, to reverse the causal relationship between base and superstructure and make ideology causal.

In the final two chapters Carneiro takes up questions concerning unilinear *vs.* multilinear evolution, whether there are laws of cultural evolution, the use of the comparative method in the study of evolution, and a renewed resistance to evolutionism among some very recent anthropologists. Regarding the first of these, Carneiro defends, as he always has, the concept of unilinear evolution. It is not a dirty word, he argues, because unilinear does not mean *rectilinear* – that all cultures always go through the very same stages. Unilinear simply means that there is an overall pattern through which most cultures have passed over time. Evolution is both unilinear and multilinear. Regarding the last – ‘neoantievolutionism’ – Carneiro points to the new ‘obscurantists’ (as Marvin Harris dubbed them) as leading the way here. These are mostly anthropologists who have become attached, inexplicably, to such forms of thought as hermeneutics and postmodernism. Carneiro's own words deserve quotation (p. 265; emphasis added):

There is little question that today those anthropologists by whom evolutionism is most conspicuously ignored, if not derided, are those who are in the passionate embrace of postmodernism. Though postmodernism did not create neo-antievolutionism, it has, without question, magnified and intensified it.

Still, it can be argued that postmodernism in anthropology should perhaps not really be designated as ‘anti-evolutionary’, as if that were its most distinctive badge. The fact is that, speaking more broadly, *postmodernism is anti-science*. It recognizes no such thing as objective reality, disdains speaking of truth... And so anti-evolutionism can be subsumed under anti-science, as a species can within a genus.

It is thus not a separate genus by itself. *On the other hand, some might say that this assessment is too charitable, that a more accurate characterization of postmodern anti-evolutionism would be that it is one 'head' of a hydraheaded monster.*

I can attest on a very personal level to the recent wave of anti-evolutionism in anthropology. My *Social Evolutionism* was reviewed in all of the major sociology journals, but it was totally ignored by the *American Anthropologist*. When I inquired as to why a book dealing with one of the great and long-standing questions in anthropology was not reviewed in its major journal, the answer was that the book review editor did not consider it worthy of review!

*Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology* is a wonderful book. As a history of evolutionism in anthropology, it nicely complements the author's slightly earlier *The Muse of History and the Science of Culture* (2000), which I reviewed in the pages of this journal (Sanderson 2003). It closely parallels my own *Social Evolutionism: A Critical History*, and even carries exactly the same subtitle, which I am sure, is purely coincidental. The quotations from anthropologists on the back describe it as 'a real masterpiece', and as virtually a 'guaranteed classic'. I myself was asked to provide a quotation, but circumstances prevented me from doing so. I would have been delighted to write a blurb for the book, because my assessment would have been quite similar to the existing ones.

Carneiro covers a great deal of territory, and he covers it very systematically and in extremely clear, workmanlike, and totally unpretentious prose. Carneiro is a scholar who came of intellectual age in the 1950s and 1960s, anthropology's heyday, and he has no use whatsoever for the incredibly pretentious nonsense that has infected anthropology in the last twenty years (mostly postmodernism and fellow travelers). Carneiro's prose is not only totally without pretense, but it clearly reveals a first-rate mind that is really doing some serious thinking, and that has been doing it for decades. It is always a pleasure to read anything written by Carneiro,

since he always has real respect for the reader and something of value to say.

My only significant disagreement with this book involves Carneiro's use of the concept of adaptation. He asserts (p. 179) that evolution produces better adapted structures, but he fails to ask, 'Better adapted to what?' This is the significant residue of functionalism in Carneiro's thinking. Whereas many of us have tried to purge functionalism from evolutionary thinking, Carneiro has not, and, indeed, claims that functionalism and evolutionism are highly compatible. But this is problematic, and in two ways. First, functionalism tends to assume that structures are adaptive for society as a whole. In American sociology, another functionalist, Robert K. Merton, long ago criticized this idea as much too overgeneralized, but it never really took hold, there or in anthropology. There has long been a debate among archaeologists as to whether the evolution of more complex societies occurred because greater complexity was needed to manage society as a whole, or because it better served the interests of elite groups. Jonathan Haas (1982) posed it as a debate between 'conflict theorists' and 'integration theorists' (functionalists), and he came down more on the side of the conflict theorists. I do as well. Undoubtedly both positions are correct to some extent, but the evidence seems to suggest that greater complexity arises largely because it serves the economic and political interests of rising and increasingly self-aggrandizing elites.

A second problem involves the unit of analysis. While recognizing the importance of individuals and their needs and goals, Carneiro tends to emphasize *cultures* or *structures* as the units of evolutionary analysis. A major criticism of functionalism years ago was that it reifies everything – it is societies or cultures that do all the work, and individuals as active agents get lost in the shuffle. I strongly agree with this criticism and think that Carneiro is not immune to it. He is a bit of a reifier (although not nearly as much as some of the reifiers). This is what leads him to say, I think, that newer structures are better adapted structures without really delving into the question of 'Adaptive for whom?' It is one of the (very few) weaknesses in Carneiro's thinking.

The only other complaint I would make about this book concerns a problem of omission rather than of commission. Carneiro ignores some important work in anthropology's sister discipline sociology. Important evolutionary works have been written by Talcott Parsons (1966, 1971), by Gerhard Lenski (1966, 1970), and by me (Sanderson 1995, 1999). Carneiro relegates these to the last two pages at the end of the book. Now Carneiro could easily argue that he was only looking at works in his own field of anthropology, but the works in question, although written by scholars identified as sociologists, raid deep into anthropological territory. This is especially the case with Lenski, who has extensive discussions of hunter-gatherer, horticultural, and intensive agricultural societies. And my own work, best represented by *Social Transformations*, also looks at hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies and devotes considerable attention to the rise of civilization and the state. Indeed, it includes an extensive discussion of theories of state origins, including Carneiro's own circumscription theory. Carneiro draws perhaps too strict a distinction between anthropology and sociology. The disciplinary affiliation of the author is far less important than the actual content of the work, and when that content is heavily anthropological there is no reason to ignore it. This is especially true when the works in question are well known and have attracted wide attention (as the work of Parsons, Lenski, and Sanderson has). (Besides, Carneiro has told me that he 'considers me one of us', meaning really an anthropologist!)

I must confess that I have another reason for making this criticism, and it is very personal. Given my admiration for Carneiro's work, I very much wanted to know what he thought of mine. In an earlier unpublished comment, he said that he did not feel competent to judge the more sociological parts of my work. Perhaps, but he is certainly highly competent to judge its more anthropological parts. I wanted to hear the thoughts of one of twentieth-century anthropology's most respected scholars and perhaps its leading evolutionist, even if they were critical.



But this is a terrific book written by a first-rate scholar and a wonderful man, and it deserves a wide audience throughout the world. I hope it will receive it.

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