Sociocultural Evolution

BRUCE G. TRIGGER. xiv + 306 pages, references, index. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. $26.95 paper. ISBN 1-55786-977-4.

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It seems almost axiomatic that the older one gets the more one worries about the future, not simply in terms of one's own fate but especially in terms of what the future might hold for one's offspring and their offspring. I imagine such worries have been part and parcel of humankind since hominids developed self-awareness and some sense of a past, present, and future. It's not easy being a parent and having to look around at what humans have done to the world and to each other. Not only does it sometimes appear as if we've ripped asunder the physical environment, but what about the social environment? How did the world become so complex and so complicated so fast? Wasnot the 20th century, at least to those living in the 19th, supposed to be an age of tremendous enlightenment? Wasn't the exponential growth in technology supposed to allow everyone to live easier? Weren't technology and its spinoffs supposed to dramatically change our lives for the better, one result of which was that we would have more time to feed and clothe those less fortunate than we? Wasn't technology supposed to tell us how to take care of the planet so that we left it in better shape than we found it? What, exactly, are the effects of improved technology? Massive weapons of destruction? Overworked agricultural fields? Polluted atmosphere? People living in less and less space? What are things going to be like when the next generation takes over the reins?

You don't have to be a prophet of doom to have these questions run through your mind. Everyone worries about the future of the earth. Some of us are fatalistic, others of us decide to act before it's too late—if it isn't already. Bruce Trigger is one of those who decided to do something about it, if only to warn us of impending doom unless we take steps to prepare for the future. His message is loud and clear: unless there is wide-ranging participation in the major cultural, economic, and political debates of the day, and unless that participation brings about dramatic change in sociocultural systems, there will be increased negative effect on the earth and all the organisms that inhabit it, including us. Trigger is clear about his bias: "there is at this stage in human history a strong need to believe in the possibility of being able to create a future that is better than the present. I maintain that a judicious view of sociocultural evolution can avoid the pitfalls of past conceptions and play such a role" [p. xii]. What Trigger really means is not sociocultural evolution but "evolutionism"—how evolution is perceived and studied.

The root of the problem as Trigger sees it resides in neoconservatism—a shorthand term for greed-based capitalism that has become so powerful and pervasive that it completely strips any power that governments have of controlling their own interests and shifts the balance of power to multinational corporations whose only allegiance is to their shareholders. Put the knife in the hearts of these powerful conglomerates, thus returning power to the rightful owners, and the world will be a safer place in which to live. It is difficult to argue with Trigger's basic point. As a greedy shareholder in several multinational corporations that have not always enjoyed a "green-friendly" history, even I have to admit that some of what he says makes sense. Either we as a sapient species exercise some degree of control over the state of our nest or we continue to befoul it, eventually turning it over to the next generation to clean up.

I am, however, more than a little curious why Trigger used the vehicle he did to make his point. The book ostensibly is about how social scientists have examined sociocultural evolution, but it's really a political statement. In fact, Trigger's coverage of cultural evolutionism is extremely narrow. Trigger once was accused by Colin Renfrew (1988) of explaining concepts such as evolutionary development entirely in terms of social context—an accu-

sation at which Trigger bridles, leading him to claim that in this book he is concerned with sociocultural evolutionism as an intellectual process and hence examines it "from an internalist point of view" [p. xii]. He also claims that his aim is "to avoid a presentistic or misleadingly unilinear account" [p. xiii]. By "presentistic" I assume he means criticizing something in terms of today's standards— that is, in light of modern "wisdom." As far as a unilinear account goes, one might wish that that indeed was what Trigger had done. Good, readable, well-referenced accounts are what educate a discipline. Polemic, however, tends often to get in the way of such accounts.

I have tremendous respect for some of the work Trigger has done in the past. For example, his *A History of Archaeological Thought* (1989), though dense in places, is a fair and useful survey of Americanist as well as non-Americanist archaeology. He obviously did his homework in writing that book, and for those of us interested primarily in archaeology as practiced in the United States, it makes a useful companion to Gordon Willey and Jeremy Sabloff's (1993) *A History of American Archaeology.* If I need a lead to the literature on a topic in Americanist archaeology, I usually can find it in one of those two books. Perhaps Trigger had a different kind of book in mind when he wrote *Sociocultural Evolution;* if so, then he succeeded, because much of the insight he has brought to previous works is either missing entirely or a mere spectre of its former self. This does not mean that the reader will find nothing of use in the book, but if I want a better entry point to the history of social evolutionism, I'll still go to Marvin Harris' (1968) classic, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory.* If I want a more theoretical perspective, I'll pick up Tim Ingold's (1986) *Evolution and Social Life.*

Trigger is highly selective in the sources he cites and tends to reference secondary sources rather than primary ones. The bibliography of the book contains nearly 450 entries, yet only about 10% were originally published in the 19th century or earlier, and only another 14% were published between 1900 and 1950. One might assume that if Trigger were going to include the more recent (and often secondary) literature on social evolutionism, he might cite the more important ones. The importance of one work over another is, of course, in some respects a judgment call, but I find it strange that Trigger does not cite Murray Leaf's (1979) *Man, Mind, and Science: A History of Anthropology,* Terry Rambo's (1991) overview of the history of cultural evolutionism in anthropology, or Derek Freeman's (1974) comparative analysis of Charles Darwin's version of biological evolutionism with Herbert Spencer's version of social evolutionism. Perhaps most surprisingly, Trigger does not even cite Spencer, although he is mentioned in several places, and cites only one reference each by Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward B. Tylor. Omission of Spencer's work is particularly startling given that Spencer's social philosophy of evolution (e.g., Gould 1997) aligns so well with the goals Trigger [p. 12] set for his book.

Trigger stated early on in the book that although he acknowledges considerable intellectual cross-fertilization between biological and cultural evolutionism, his coverage of those ties was going to be limited to what he judged to be necessary to understand cultural evolutionism. (Again, "evolutionism," the study of evolution, is my term. Trigger uses the word "evolution" for both the focus of study and how it is studied.) Such a strategy is understandable, and in hindsight it might have been a good one because it is clear that Trigger does not understand biological evolutionism. If he did, he could not make the following statement: "In biology...the basic mechanisms of evolution have been confirmed and elaborated over the past 150 years. Biologists continue to debate issues such as group selection, the relative importance of gradual change and punctuated equilibrium, and the role played by catastrophes of extraterritorial origin, but in general they agree concerning what brings change about" [p. 9]. To this I respond, "hardly." Anyone who would make such a claim has not perused the biological, paleobiological, and philosophical literature with even a casual eye. Trigger does reference Darwin's (1859) *On the Origin of Species,* but his brief comparison of Darwin's evolutionism and sociocultural evolutionism lacks detail and is flawed by this misunderstanding of the former (see Derek Freeman's [1974] treatment for a more detailed and accurate comparison).

Trigger is correct that "In the social sciences there is no generally accepted single explanation of change; instead there is a spectrum of competing theories which stress ecological determinism at one end and cultural determinism at the other" [pp. 9–10]. With reference to archaeology, he makes brief note of efforts to incorporate the basic tenets of Darwinism into the study of the archaeological record—what he terms "neo-evolutionism"—but he shows a distinct lack of familiarity with that literature when he states that neo-evolutionists deny that "consciousness and intentionality play a significant role in shaping human behaviour" [p. 136]. This is incorrect, as evolutionists (e. g., Lyman and O'Brien 1998; O'Brien, Lyman, and Leonard 1998) have pointed out repeatedly in the face of similar misreadings. Trigger is firmly in the mainstream of cultural thought when he makes statements such as:

> Already by the 1950s, it was recognized that the analogy between biological and sociocultural evolution broke down for various reasons...in biology the source of genetic variation is mutation, which appears to be a random

> process at least in relation to selection....By contrast, cultural innovation often takes the form of a conscious modification of existing knowledge to achieve a desired result. Hence cultural innovation is to some extent purposeful, goal-oriented, and therefore, at least in the short term, teleological. [p. 136]

No evolutionist has argued—or ever would argue—that behavior is not, as Ernst Mayr (1970: 388) put it, "perhaps the strongest selection pressure operating in the animal kingdom." But to argue that human decision making and "conscious modification of existing knowledge" [p. 136] has exempted humans from the long reach of selection is a result of misplaced emphasis on proximate rather than ultimate cause.

Trigger's statement that by the 1950s it was generally shown that biological and cultural evolution were not analogous is true from a historical standpoint. The "Modern Synthesis" that occurred in biology in the early 1940s had no effect on cultural evolutionism, as evidenced in the tone of the chapters in volumes edited by anthropologists to celebrate the centennial of the publication of Darwin's *Origin* (e. g., Meggers 1959; Tax 1960). Leslie White and Julian Steward had assumed center stage by that point, and they were not the least bit interested in de-elevating culture to the status of being simply another bit of the biological imperative. There were a few voices in the wilderness—for example, William Haag (1959), Stanley South (1955), and Gordon Willey (1961)—but for the most part the voices that at one time had vainly searched for, and actually gotten close to, a logical wedding of biological and cultural evolution—for example, A. V. Kidder (1932)—were nothing but dim memories. The result in Americanist archaeology was the development of a neo-evolutionism—processualism—that depended heavily on Whitean "culturology" to sustain it. Trigger examines that brand of evolutionism in *Sociocultural Evolution,* as he does in much more detail in *A History of Archaeological Thought.* Here he is much more at home with the literature and presents a good overview of the subject.

In summary, Trigger's current book has some things to recommend it, but its use would be best suited as a brief introduction to a very complex subject. Anyone deeply interested in the question of why societies change will be sorely disappointed. If one's interest is more toward a brief history of how social scientists (using the latter word loosely) have gone about investigating that change, then one will be less disappointed. Finally, if one's interest is in how to change the course of cultural evolution in order to save the planet from ruin, then one will absorb what Trigger has to say and want more. For those of us who are diehard evolutionists, it's all to easy to sit back and say that the future is going to happen anyway, so just let it go, and maybe it takes someone such as Trigger to remind us that perhaps we can make a difference. I've never been particularly convinced that we can learn much from the past that is of benefit in plotting a future course, but despite that bias I find it difficult to denigrate the efforts of those who constantly are searching the past for ways to address modern concerns. To be a spokesperson for what is just and moral in the modern world in an important sense transcends the need to produce the book to end all books on sociocultural evolution and evolutionism.

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