

REVIEW ARTICLE

**SELECTIVE NATURALIZATION:
W. G. RUNCIMAN'S SOCIAL THEORY**

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W. G. RUNCIMAN, *A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume I: The Methodology of Social Theory*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1988. xii, 341 pp., Index. £12.50/\$19.95.

W. G. RUNCIMAN, *A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume II: Substantive Social Theory*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1989. xiii, 450 pp., References, Index. £12.95/\$18.95.

W. G. RUNCIMAN, *Confessions of a Reluctant Theorist: Selected Essays of W. G. Runciman*, New York etc.: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1989. vii, 248 pp., Index. £30.00.

I

THE history of anthropology has rarely paralleled that of its occasionally indistinguishable twin, sociology, and so it is not altogether surprising that at a time when anthropological theory is widely considered to lack vitality and direction, sociological theory is enjoying a renaissance. No sooner had Jeffrey Alexander reviewed the 'tired' state of the subject in his four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984), than two sociologists began

publishing works that set out to rival the all-encompassing theories of the discipline's founding fathers: one volume of Michael Mann's projected three-volume *Sources of Social Power* (1986) has thus far appeared as well as the two volumes of Runciman's projected three-volume *Treatise on Social Theory* under review here. Both authors are trying to develop a general theory of social change through the course of world history. The likelihood of an anthropologist attempting something on this scale (say a new *Golden Bough*) seems so remote that it is worth asking to what the relative vigour of sociological theory is to be attributed. Is it the result of the refusal to be diverted from the study of social structure into the blind alley of cultural interpretation, or is it simply indicative of a failure to learn from the over-confidence of previous generations?

Of the two theorists, Runciman is the one whose work is likely to be of greater interest to anthropologists. Not only are his intellectual range and ambitions the more extensive, but, since he perceives no essential difference between the two disciplines, he specifically includes the methods and data of anthropology within what is primarily a sociological study. However, as the title essay of the collection *Confessions of a Reluctant Theorist* reveals, Runciman cuts an unusual figure in academic life, let alone sociology. His formal training in the subject is limited (to one semester at Columbia and one at Berkeley), and he has long combined his academic pursuits with a career in the family shipping business, of which he is now the chairman. He has been spared the need to seek professional advancement or to do more than occasional teaching, and, to judge from the first two volumes of the *Treatise* (which have been cleared of intra-disciplinary reference in order to exhibit the author's remarkable familiarity with the literature of history, both ancient and modern), it is his undergraduate education as a classicist and historian that has left the more lasting impression. It somehow seems fitting that he, like Frazer, should be writing his *magnum opus* as a senior research fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

In the *Confessions*, Runciman states that it was when 'names such as Foucault, Habermas and Ricoeur were starting to appear on Anglophone reading lists' and sociology was 'disappearing under a cloud of increasingly acrimonious methodological disputation' that he realized he would have to write a theoretical work establishing the identity and integrity of the discipline (*Confessions*, p. 5). However, the *Treatise* reveals no interest in the new forms of Marxism, hermeneutics, and systems theory that have set the tone of theoretical discussion in the intervening period. The best (and most charitable) way to interpret this omission, is to see the mid-1960s, not as the point at which Runciman began grappling with critical theory, but as the time at which he withdrew from the debate to survey the evidence for which all social theories must account—the historical development of human societies. His unwillingness to engage with contemporary theory significantly reduces the immediate relevance of many of his arguments, but it also means that the *Treatise* has a curiously timeless (or at least nineteenth-century) quality. In its historical and geographical range, and in its close attention to detail, it surpasses anything written since Weber, and if this is

achieved at the cost of self-imposed blindness to the insights of other theorists, so be it. Grand theories need a lot of facts, and Runciman is exceptional in having historical knowledge commensurate with his theoretical ambitions. For this reason alone, the *Treatise* deserves serious attention.

II

The first volume of the *Treatise* deals not with history but with methodology. It addresses the long-standing controversy about whether there is 'a fundamental difference in kind between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man' (*Treatise I*, p. 1). It is not a debate in which natural scientists take much part, but for the social scientist interest in the question is fuelled by status anxiety. As Runciman puts it: 'the twentieth-century social scientist, whatever his views on the scope and nature of his subject, cannot help being driven by the relative paucity of his results to the fear that he may be forever excluded from the enchanted garden in which the fruit of the tree of knowledge can be seen hanging so much closer within reach' (*ibid.*). The object of the first volume of the *Treatise* is to clear the way to this epistemological paradise.

Runciman assumes that there is a valid distinction to be made between science and non-science, and argues that social science (by which he means the consubstantial trinity of sociology, anthropology and history) is a genuine example of the former, albeit one that has developed in 'methodological subordination to the sciences of nature' (*ibid.*). He quickly dismisses the objection that he fails to make any distinction between nature and culture, or to allow for the limitations of cultural relativity, and proceeds to what he considers to be the major problem: the fact that the data of social science include behaviour that has meaning to the agents. The social scientist is obliged not only to account for human behaviour but to understand it, and this, Runciman concedes, involves 'the risk of a category of mistakes which his colleagues in natural science will never have the occasion to make' (*Treatise I*, p. 15). But, 'the meaningfulness of behaviour does not render it inexplicable...[for] the additional difficulty it raises is not to do with explanation' (*ibid.*). There is, he argues, 'no special problem of explanation in the human sciences...only a special problem of description' (*Treatise I*, p. 1).

The whole of the first volume is devoted to the distinction that underlies this conclusion. According to Runciman, there are three types of understanding: those involved in reportage, explanation, and (in a special sense of the word) description. Although all are interwoven in a complete account of a given social phenomenon, Runciman claims that the three are logically distinct and methodologically separable, both from one another and from the fourth activity proper to the social scientist—evaluation. Reportage, the primary level of understanding, involves the identification of words, actions, events and intentions in such a way that the report

can be accepted as factual by rival observers from different theoretical schools; explanation, the secondary level, is the claim that a reported event or state came about because and only because of some antecedent event or state of affairs; description, the tertiary level, conveys an accurate impression of what it is like for those involved in a given situation, and evaluation is the process by which the researcher passes judgement on the success or failure of social action and assesses its moral, political, aesthetic or religious desirability. This fourfold classification allows Runciman to assert the value-freedom of social-scientific enquiry while at the same time acknowledging that the researcher may legitimately make value-judgements, and enables him to steer a course 'between the Scylla of positivistic empiricism and the Charybdis of phenomenological hermeneutics' (*Treatise I*, p. 144) by placating the former with his account of explanation, and the latter with his account of description. Needless to say, there is always a suspicion that Runciman is trying to have everything both ways, and the chief interest of the volume lies in his (not altogether successful) attempt to make his definitions of reportage, explanation, description and evaluation both internally coherent and mutually independent.

Regarding reportage, Runciman accepts the maxim 'no observations without presuppositions', but denies that the resulting report will necessarily contain any explanatory or evaluative bias. Provided that a report can be transposed *salve veritate* into the terms of a rival observer of a different theoretical persuasion, there is no problem. Alongside the rival observer, Runciman introduces another hypothetical figure, a "recording angel" [who] is supposed to have been present at and throughout whatever event, process or state of affairs is under discussion, but to have brought to it no explanatory, descriptive or evaluative presuppositions of any kind' (*Treatise I*, p. 96). An accurate, theory-neutral report is thus one that is acceptable to a rival observer in his own terms, and which corresponds to the recording angel's videotapes of the event. Runciman is aware that this account will not convince the sceptic, but his concerns are methodological, not philosophical. Even so, his attempt to show that successful reportage can be less than objective but more than consensual appears to be misconceived, for he seems merely to have shifted the problem to another level. The recording angel may have no explanatory, descriptive or evaluative presuppositions, but he must have some presuppositions in order to observe. A theory-neutral videotape library will not be a single presuppositionless record of events, but a comprehensive library of films taken by every possible means from every possible perspective. A rival observer may not only favour different explanatory theories, he may also have different views on data-gathering. If so, he will not only report differently, but also observe differently, and although his reports can be falsified by the recording angel's archive (in so far as they do not correspond to what has been observed), his observations cannot.

The difficulties caused by this anomaly are highlighted by Runciman's account of explanation. He distinguishes between explanatory theories and theoretical presuppositions on the grounds that the former can be disconfirmed by some

specified observation or set of observations, whereas the latter are untestable. However, the distinction is not absolute, for disconfirmation through observation can only take place within shared observational presuppositions, some of which may be theoretical. Runciman might protest that the objection is irrelevant, since it applies equally to scientific enquiry, and his sole concern is to show that social science operates in the same way as other sciences. But the spread of opinion in the social sciences is far greater than in the natural, and the measure of agreement about how, what, or how long to observe, far less. Runciman claims that the recording angel 'is not to be taken merely to embody the lowest common methodological denominator of...rival Behaviourist, Structuralist, Phenomenological, Marxian, Durkheimian, Weberian, Utilitarian or other schools' (*Treatise I*, p. 99), yet this is precisely what the angel will have to be if his role is to be of any value at all.

Runciman notes that 'every person capable of primary understanding of what other people say and do is capable of some degree of tertiary understanding simply by virtue of the faculty of imagination with which all human beings are endowed' (*Treatise I*, p. 226). But he does not see that the primary understanding of human actions is often impossible without tertiary understanding. Although the identification of actions does not usually require any knowledge of how it feels to be a particular agent in a specific cultural context, it does involve some awareness of what it is like to be an agent, and of what it might be like to perform the action in question. Without such knowledge it is difficult to ascribe motives, and thus to identify actions correctly. (As it stands, anyone writing a report on Runciman's principles would produce something like Craig Raine's poem 'A Martian Sends a Post-Card Home'.) The attempt to separate reportage and description may be misguided, but Runciman's discussion of the latter remains interesting because he there allows for many difficulties passed over in his account of the former. He tacitly acknowledges the distinction between reportage and observation by dividing misdescription into mystification (suppression, exaggeration and ethnocentricity) and misapprehension (incompleteness, oversimplification and ahistoricity). He also concedes to agents what he does not permit observers, namely 'a fundamentally privileged position in describing what their experiences are like' (*Treatise I*, p. 226), allows that 'no two authentic, well-grounded descriptions are ever incompatible' (*Treatise I*, p. 295), and suggests that 'the only test of their value is their capacity to enlarge the reader's tertiary understanding of what the experience was like in such a way that those who had the experience could in principle be brought to agree that it does' (*Treatise I*, p. 272).

If the distinction between reportage and description is untenable, the claim that 'there is no special problem of explanation in the human sciences' is undermined, and with it the basis for Runciman's argument that the methodology of the social sciences is conformable to that of the natural sciences. However, his contention that reportage and explanation are independent of evaluation remains intact. On this topic (as, of course, implicitly in the previous discussion) Runciman's starting-point is Weberian. In an earlier work, *A Critique of Max Weber's Philosophy of*

Social Science (Runciman 1972), he dwelt at length on Weber's 'confusion between theoretical presuppositions and judgements of value' (*ibid.*: 61), pointing out that while the presuppositions of sociological research are value-relevant in so far as they relate to values, they are not necessarily derived from the values of the researcher in anything other than the trivial sense (true also of research in the natural sciences) that research usually presupposes values such as the value of validity. In the *Treatise*, Runciman restates this argument with the additional claim that the human sciences can be considered less than value-free 'only if it is the case that every observation statement about human behaviour logically entails, or is entailed by, some value-judgement' (*Treatise I*, p. 8). This is an absurdly over-restrictive formulation—the human sciences are not composed of isolated observation-statements but (to use Runciman's phrase) 'precise and plausible hypotheses [grounded] in strong and surprising theories' (*Treatise I*, p. 180)—and it would be fairer to say that, in practice, social science is evaluative only if its hypotheses (not, it should be noted, its theories) are implausible except when taken in conjunction with a contested value-judgement. However, even by this more inclusive criterion, the value-freedom that Runciman claims for the social scientist remains a possibility, for some (admittedly low-level) hypotheses do seem to be attractive to researchers irrespective of their theoretical orientation, political persuasion or cultural identity.

III

From the brief critical summary given above, it may be difficult to see why it takes Runciman three hundred and fifty pages to define four words. So, before turning to the second volume of the *Treatise*, it is necessary to say something about the unusual style in which both volumes are written. Runciman, who aspires to give an exhaustive treatment of his subject, enumerates the possible variants of each term at every step in his argument. This practice imparts to the text an air of pedantry that is not dispelled by the extraordinary range of historical and literary examples with which the author attempts to enliven it. As a result, the lucidity that characterized his earlier books and essays has been lost, and the *Treatise* often reads, not like the work of a literate sociologist, but like a legal document interspersed with transcripts from BBC Radio 4's 'Round Britain Quiz'.

Although accurately described as 'a test of fortitude' (Giddens 1990: 41), reading the second volume is, none the less, rewarding. Runciman's 'substantive social theory' is a remarkable attempt to bring within a single theoretical framework the analysis of every society in every period of world history. His basic premise is that 'the study of societies is the study of people in roles, and the study of people in roles is the study of the institutional distribution of power' (*Treatise II*, p. 3). Power, which is defined as 'the capacity of persons to affect

through either inducements or sanctions what is thought, felt, said or done by other persons, subject to that capacity deriving from the possession of institutional, not personal attributes' (*Treatise II*, p. 2), is said to come in only three basic forms: economic, ideological, and coercive. A society can be pictured as an inverted pyramid in which the apex (at the base) represents the zero-point, and the three upturned corners the purest forms, of power in each dimension. Each point in the pyramid is a person in a role; groups of people, who have 'by virtue of their roles a distinguishable and more than transiently similar location and, on that account, a common interest' (*Treatise II*, p. 20), constitute systacts (a neologism that Runciman uses to cover orders, estates, classes, status-groups, castes, factions, age-sets and the like). The social structure of a society can thus be characterized by the identity and location of systacts within the inverted pyramid of power.

This analysis of structure synthesizes Weberian and Marxist themes in a fashion more elegant than original. The novelty of Runciman's approach derives from his encounter with Darwin, and becomes evident only when the discussion moves from social structure to social change. He contends that 'the history of any chosen society has...to be narrated as an evolving range of alternative modes of the distribution of power within an evolving set of constraints' (*Treatise II*, p. 40). Societies thus evolve through a process of social selection in which practices (described as 'functionally defined units of reciprocal action informed by the mutually recognized intentions and beliefs of designated persons about their respective capacity to influence each other's behaviour by virtue of their roles' (*Treatise II*, p. 41)) that confer a competitive advantage on the systacts which carry them, are selected for survival. The parallels with biological evolution are roughly as follows: practices/genes, roles/organisms, power/reproductive capacity, systacts/groups, societies/species. So, to work out his theory of social evolution, Runciman has to take on the roles of Linnaeus, Darwin and Mendel: he has to produce a taxonomy of human societies; specify the process by which one has evolved from another; and identify the practices that determine both continuity and change.

The taxonomy is derived from a consideration of the possible combinations of the different types of economic, coercive and ideological power. According to Runciman, there are 448 such combinations, of which about a dozen have been actualized. They comprise: (at the stage before statehood) societies in which power is limited (hunter-gatherers), dissipated ('big-men' and their equivalents), shared (a non-sovereign oligarchy), and obstructed (a non-sovereign 'monarchy'); (at the pre-industrial stage) patrimonial, citizen, warrior, bureaucratic, feudal and bourgeois states; and (at the industrial stage) capitalist, socialist and authoritarian nation-states. Most of the second volume is devoted to a description of the types and an analysis of the sub-types and variants. Discussion of the patterns of evolution and the mechanisms of change is therefore left to a final chapter that, although it enumerates a variety of processes by which change takes place and examines a few test-cases, is not the grand evolutionary history of human societies in which the project should culminate.

Runciman, who began the first volume of the *Treatise* with the promise of a return to Eden, ends the second with the claim that his theory is 'no less demonstrably superior to its rivals than Darwin's was' (*Treatise II*, p. 449). The failure to work out the specifically evolutionary part of the theory means that this judgement is more than a little premature. Runciman might claim that all the conceptual apparatus is in place, and that it only requires someone with more time and comparable historical erudition to complete the task. (He is not planning to do the job himself—the projected third volume is to be an analysis of twentieth-century England.) But it is by no means certain that anyone is likely to bother. There have already been several inauspicious attempts to unite sociology with Darwinism, and although Runciman (with his distinction between the explanatory and the evaluative) is at pains to point out that his theory has no ethical or political bias, its evolutionary structure remains problematic. The most obvious source of difficulty is the fact that the analogies with biological evolution are frequently misleading. For example, Runciman assumes that 'the agents of social change cannot themselves be understood (in the secondary, explanatory sense) as the outcome of social selection any more than the agents of genetic change as the outcome of natural selection', and so concludes that 'the social theorist can and must treat the emergence of variants as random' (*Treatise II*, p. 42). However useful it may be for the biologist to think of mutation as random, there seems no reason why the social theorist should consider the mutation of practices 'independently caused and therefore explicable only at a different level' (*ibid.*). Unlike genes, practices stand in a constitutive (as well as causative) relation to the data, and to disavow interest in their variability is to exclude much of what social science usually purports to explain.

The false analogy between genes and practices also informs Runciman's view that 'practices are selected not for their own attributes, but as attributes of their carriers' (*Treatise II*, p. 46). On this premise, the selection of practices takes place only through the selection of roles (and systacts). But practices are independent of their carriers in a way that genes are not, and may, as the result of imitation, be reproduced in a systact (or society) other than that in which they were previously carried. Runciman does not allow for the possibility that the conquerors may adopt the practices of the conquered, or that one society may simply attempt to replicate the structure of another. (For example, the recent shift from a socialist to a liberal-democratic system in Eastern Europe is not usefully explained in terms of the random variability of the practices of state socialism, yet Runciman, who is committed to the position that social change takes place through the competitive selection of pre-existing practices, would have to offer some such explanation.) Furthermore, the selection of practices is not only independent of the selection of systacts, but the selection of systacts is at least partially independent of the selection of practices, for the reproduction of a systact may perpetuate some (vestigial) practices that do not confer a competitive advantage but are simply carried along with those that do.

It is, however, the awkward parallel between a society and a species that reveals most clearly the inadequacy of Runciman's evolutionary theory. For those who (unlike the present reviewer) possess the historical knowledge necessary to appreciate their relevance, one of the delights of Runciman's second volume must be his willingness to make comparisons between societies of widely differing historical and geographical locations (for example, eleventh-century England is first compared to twentieth-century Sweden (*Treatise II*, p. 145) and then classified with Hammurabi's Babylonia (*Treatise II*, pp. 239ff.)). Some of these comparisons may be peculiarly apposite, but it seems as though Runciman has forgotten that human beings transform their environments, and that while the creatures of a single species retain their genetic identity wherever or whenever they are found, the character of a society does not depend solely on its internal power structure; it is also fundamentally altered by technological advances, and by changes in its position relative to other societies and states (cf. Adams 1977: 399). Although acknowledged in the distinction between industrial and pre-industrial societies, Runciman does not otherwise allow for ecological factors in his classification: he thus categorizes both post-Carolingian Europe and post-colonial Latin America as feudal societies, as though the invention of printing made no significant difference to the structure of ideological power, or the invention of gunpowder to coercive power, or the industrialization of other parts of the world to the exercise of economic power.

Given the results, one wonders whether Runciman's taxonomy serves any purpose. The benefit of taxonomy in the biological sciences is that it reduces a profusion of organisms to a more manageable number of relatively uniform species. Human history offers nothing like the same variety of social arrangements, and each society can quite easily be studied individually. Moreover, since the study of history is already well advanced, it is by no means clear that the addition of an evolutionary framework adds very much to what is already known, or substantially alters the way in which existing information is interpreted. The impact of evolutionary theory in biology derived from its capacity to create a plausible narrative for natural history, but, since no one imagines that societies are immutable, or that competition is not a factor in social change, an evolutionary theory of human history is not a radical innovation, except when it incorporates some evaluative or teleological premise of the kind that Runciman eschews.

Compared with Darwin, Runciman explains little; compared with Marx and Weber, his work lacks mythopoeic power. Social theory can inspire as well as explain, but nowhere in the *Treatise* does one detect the voice of prophecy struggling with the language of science. Runciman has no vision of the future, no nostalgia for the past, and little sympathy with the human struggle he describes; all he has to offer is the conviction that his theory has such explanatory potential that it should effect a Darwinian revolution in the social sciences. The imperturbable urbanity of the *Treatise* does not conceal compelling insights; if it disguises anything, it is the extraordinary ambition of its 'reluctant' author.

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