
W.G. RUNCIMAN, *Very Different, But Much the Same: The Evolution of English Society Since 1714* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015)

In one sense it is easy to review a book that brings such pleasure! Here we have a leading sociologist reflecting on his own society after a lifetime of thought and action, both as shipping magnate and as a member of “the great and the good.” The range of scholarship consulted is deeply impressive, the argument clear and convincing, and the whole constructed with considerable elegance. No book on British society now available matches this one, and it absolutely deserves wide readership by the public as much as by academics. The main object of this review is to justify these claims by describing the argument and the materials that support it so as to encourage readership. Limited negative critique follows before turning to the matter so close to Runciman’s heart—his insistence that adopting the theory of social evolution, properly understood, will ensure genuine cognitive advance in social science.¹

The argument of the book is that of the title. The book starts charmingly with Daniel Defoe’s *Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* published in two volumes between 1724 and 1726 so as to ask thereafter in the simplest terms about what has and what has not changed. In this matter Runciman is *parti pris*. He is interested in the “memes” of the society that carry information and the state of “systacts”—by which is meant the grading of authority structures. The complete neo-Darwinian theory of social evolution that he holds is concerned with biological, social and cultural selection, but the concentration here is on the latter pair analyzed through the Weberian levels of politics, ideology and the economy. The central claim of similarity is strikingly evident in the two last chapters. The first of these is a tour de force analyzing a huge number of studies concerned with intergenerational social mobility. Runciman notes slight change, the small chances of entering the top and of leaving the bottom and considerable mobility within middling sections of a changed

¹ This book covers some of the same ground as his *A Treatise on Social Theory. Volume Three: Applied Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge

University Press, 1997), but the character of the argument is now very different, based very much on his view of social evolution.

occupational structure, but demonstrates effectively the stability of the system as a whole. The second considers a concern with liberty to characterize English society over time—political liberty in a parliamentary system, freedom of thought, and the continued presence of a market system—and argues interestingly that alternatives, whether socialist or authoritarian, have little chance of success. A particular feature of the book is his ability to stand back, to report objectively without letting us know anything about his own political preferences: thus a particular development might have been, he often notes, liked by conservative pundits, opposed by liberals and loathed by socialists.

Three features of the main chapters on politics, ideology and the economy stand out. The first is the sophistication of the sociological judgements that he brings to bear. He is well aware, for instance, that the working class often resented state interference, and is properly skeptical of the view that the mass media control opinion in any direct manner. Secondly, the material on which he draws is nothing less than astonishing. Runciman is at home with the laws of England and Wales, and of the changes that Royal Commissions of various sorts have made to them. So the argument is grounded. Added to this is an encyclopaedic knowledge of reports on English society from all quarters, including those from the social sciences. A particular pleasure can be found in the way in which he demonstrates that the assumptions and findings of contemporary social science echo those of earlier eras. Here is a characteristic comment: “a single mother refused supplementary benefit by a local official on the grounds of cohabitation under the regulations in force in the 1970s was in much the same position as she would have been in the 1770s under questioning from the parish overseer” [41]. The third feature of interest is the range of subject matter covered. Some indication can be given by noting the contents of the chapters. The chapter on the state considers in turn corruption, voting (with special reference to working class conservatives), trade unions, the relations between the centre and the periphery, and the police. The chapter on ideology is particularly impressive, treating in turn the entry of the working class, professionalization and credentialism, the decline of the established Anglican church, the education system, and the role of women. The chapter on the economy is slightly shorter, concentrating on the capitalist nature of the economy and the rise of white collar work. But mere listings do not capture the subtlety of the argument, the recognition time and again of changes, none of which disrupt the authority structure of the society. And it is at this point that it is necessary to say that this is not at all an easy book to

review: its great power depends on close reasoning that can only be appreciated by careful reading.

Runciman writes with such authority when reporting and explaining English society that he pays no attention to alternative general interpretations. But one would have liked to have had his critique of alternative views. The Nairn-Anderson thesis might very well not detain him for long given its rather mechanical nature, but it did have at its heart the idea of continuity—deemed excessive and dangerous—that stands at the heart of Runciman's book.² More importantly, many scholars, from Geoffrey Ingham to W.D. Rubinstein, have stressed a peculiarity of capitalism in England, namely the central role of finance within it, purportedly a role that restricted industrial capitalism.³ Again, one would welcome Runciman's critique. Finally, we hear little about the role of external forces on internal development. Did ties to the empire hold the economy back in the early postwar years?⁴ Did and indeed does “the Special Relationship”—special to Britain that is, rather than to the United States—curtail the finding of a new, more progressive place in the world?

At the very end of the book Runciman puzzles about the “hold-outs” who have failed to adopt the social evolutionary perspective that he favours. This is a brutal charge that might consign a sinner to an inner circle of hell, so it is best handled carefully. On the one hand, there is a great deal to praise in his intellectual approach. His version of social evolution is no acorn to oak tree theory, and it is far removed from any crude version of sociobiology. Then there is everything to be said for an insistence on the need for institutions and societies to adapt to circumstances when facing competitive pressures. I am reminded here of the late Patricia Crone's brilliant intervention at a conference on “the European Miracle.” She insisted that the great agrarian civilizations were evolutionary successes as they provided a settled way of life that lasted for centuries; in contrast, edgy, decentred Europe was a failure, unable to create anything as stable. This is to suggest that success comes from adaptation, innovation from the periphery, from failures. Perhaps Runciman agrees; certainly his

² The thesis was expounded in a large number of articles, but the key texts remain T. Nairn, “The British Political Elite” and P. Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, *New Left Review*, 23 January-February 1964. The thesis gained some of its fame as the result of E.P. Thompson's merciless attack upon it, “The Peculiarities of the English”, *Socialist Register*, London, 1965, pp. 311-62.

³ G. Ingham, *Capitalism Divided: City and Industry in British Social Development*, London, Macmillan 1985; W.D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution*, 2nd Edition, London, Social Affairs Unit, 2006.

⁴ This was suggested by A. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

ENGLISH ADAPTATIONS

account of English society is in the end one of a “successful” society. But having said all this, I am not quite sure that his approach is as novel as he imagines. Perhaps this is because I absorbed a little Darwin with my mother’s milk, making his views seem less than novel but exactly right for sociological investigation. Still he may be right that his position offers a serious corrective to error, which does indeed abound in the market place. Debate of this point can be left for another occasion. What matters here is to recognize and to praise this superlative sociological contribution.

J O H N A . H A L L