

How Veblen Generalized Darwinism

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Abstract: The inspiration of Darwin on Veblen is well known. However, the manner in which Veblen incorporated Darwinian ideas is inadequately appreciated. Veblen not only adopted Darwinian strictures on the causal explanation of the individual agent but also upheld that Darwinian principles of inheritance and selection applied to individual habits and social institutions. This amounts to the generalization of Darwinian principles to socio-economic evolution.

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Thorstein Veblen repeatedly proclaimed the need for a “post-Darwinian” economics.¹ However, the Darwinian aspect of Veblenian thinking was largely neglected, both by later commentators and by the tradition of American institutionalism that Veblen inspired (Hodgson 2003; 2004a). This paper establishes that Veblen followed Darwin in proposing that Darwinian principles can be generalized to apply to the evolution of social as well as biological phenomena.

Social scientists have often wrongly dismissed Darwinism as supporting racism or nationalism (Hodgson 2006). It endorses neither inequality nor strife. Further, as Veblen (1896, 100) wrote, “it is . . . only by injecting a wholly illegitimate teleological meaning to the term ‘fittest’ as used by Darwin and the Darwinists that the expression ‘survival of the fittest’ is made to mean a survival of the socially desirable individuals.” A Veblenian application of generalized Darwinian principles to social evolution does not mean the adoption of “social Darwinism” as widely understood. What, then, does it mean? It is also logically independent of the separate question whether or not (some) human phenomena can be (partly) explained in biological terms.²

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The Domain and Meaning of Generalized Darwinism

If – like Veblen (1909a, 300) – we reject the idea that explanations of social phenomena can be reduced entirely to biological terms, then what place is left for Darwinism in the social sciences? Darwin (1859, 422-3; 1871, vol. 1, 59-61) himself conjectured that natural selection operates upon the elements of human language as well as on individual organisms. Darwin (1871, vol. 1, 166) also argued that tribal groups with ethical ideas that served the common good would be favored by “natural selection.”

A small number of astute thinkers have considered the possibility that Darwinian mechanisms in some general sense might also apply to the evolution of societies, cultures and ideas. Walter Bagehot (1872) wrote of inheritance and natural selection in the social and political sphere. William James (1880, 441) opened a path-breaking essay with the observation of a “remarkable parallel . . . between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoölogical evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other.” Samuel Alexander (1892) and Benjamin Kidd (1894) wrote on the natural selection of ethical principles. And David Ritchie (1896, 171) considered “a ‘natural selection’ of ideas, customs, institutions, irrespective of the natural selection of individuals and of races.” The scene was set for Veblen’s crucial innovations.³

Contrary to some misconceptions (Cordes 2006; Witt 2006), the idea of generalizing Darwinism is not essentially about biological metaphors or analogies. Instead, it relies on common abstract features in both the social and the biological world. It is essentially a contention of a degree of *ontological communality*, at a high level of abstraction and not at the level of detail.⁴

With an analogy, phenomena and processes in one domain are taken as the reference point for the study of similar phenomena or processes in another domain. By contrast, generalization in science starts from a copious array of different phenomena and processes, without giving analytical priority to any of them over others. Given that the entities and processes involved are very different, any common principles will be highly abstract and will not reflect detailed mechanisms unique to any particular domain.

Generalizing Darwinism does not rely on the mistaken idea that the mechanisms of evolution in the social and the biological world are similar. Not only does natural and social evolution differ greatly in their details, but also detailed mechanisms differ greatly *within* the biological world. To say that two sets of phenomena are similar in highly general terms does not imply that they are similar in detailed respects.

Darwinism addresses what we may describe as “complex population systems,” found in both nature and society (Hodgson and Knudsen 2006a; Aldrich *et al.* forthcoming). The proposal is that all complex population systems can be analyzed in terms of general Darwinian principles.

What are complex population systems? Populations are defined by members of a type that are similar in key respects, but within each type there is some degree of

variation. Entities within these populations have limited capacities to consume some materials and energy from their environment and they have gained the use of mechanisms with which to process some information useful for survival. All these entities are mortal and degradable, and they need to consume materials and energy in order to survive or minimize degradation. However, because they do not have access to all environmental resources at once, these entities face an omnipresent problem of *local and immediate scarcity*, as well as the possibility of binding resource constraints. These circumstances present specific problems that the entities must solve to minimize degradation and raise their chances of survival. In short, these entities are engaged in a *struggle for existence* (Darwin 1859, 62-63).

Further assume that these entities have some capacity to retain and pass on to others workable solutions to problems of survival. Retaining such solutions avoids the costs and risks of learning them anew. This is the basis of the Darwinian *principle of inheritance*, which refers to a broad class of mechanisms, including those of “replication” and “descent,” by which information concerning adaptations is retained, preserved, passed on or copied through time (Mayr 1991).

Overall, these systems involve populations of non-identical (intentional or non-intentional) entities that face locally scarce resources and problems of survival. The entities retain some adaptive solutions to such problems and may pass them on to other entities. Examples of populations in such systems are plentiful both in nature and in human society. In addition, as Veblen argued, they include human institutions, as long as we regard institutions as cohesive entities having some capacity for the retention and replication of problem solutions. In this manner, the common ontological features of all complex population systems, including in nature and human society, are established, without ignoring the huge differences of detail between them.

Veblen's Adoption of Generalized Darwinian Principles

On January 23, 1896, Veblen wrote to his student Sarah Hardy concerning his current work:

Economics is to be brought in line with modern evolutionary science, which it has not been hitherto . . . the science, taken generally, is to shape itself into a science of the evolution of economic institutions. (Quoted in Jorgensen and Jorgensen, 1999, 194)

Veblen understood that Darwinism involved three central principles. First, there must be sustained variation among the members of a species or population. Variations may be random or purposive in origin, but without them natural selection cannot operate. Second, there must be some mechanism of heredity or continuity, through which offspring resemble their parents more than they resemble other members of their species. In other words, there has to be some mechanism through which individual characteristics are passed on through the generations. Third, natural

selection operates because better-adapted organisms leave increased numbers of offspring, or because the variations that are preserved bestow advantage in struggling to survive. Consider these three features in turn, as they appear in Veblen's work.

For Veblen (1900, 266) a Darwinian science must address "the conditions of variational growth." Veblen (1901, 81) saw a "Darwinistic account" in economics as addressing "the origin, growth, persistence, and variation of institutions." Veblen (1899, 217) also referred to "a selection between the predatory and the peaceable variants." Veblen (1909b, 628) saw cultural variation as cumulative: "The growth of culture is a cumulative sequence of habituation" but "each new move creates a new situation which induces a further new variation in the habitual manner of response" and "each new situation is a variation of what has gone before and embodies as causal factors all that has been effected by what went before." For Veblen, the "instinctive propensity" of "idle curiosity" was also a major ongoing source of variety and invention.

Turning to the Darwinian concept of inheritance, Veblen (1898a, 390-3) saw habits and institutions as units of relative stability and continuity through time, ensuring that characteristics are passed on from one period to the next. An individual's "methods of life today are enforced upon him by his habits of life carried over from yesterday and the circumstances left as the mechanical residue of the life of yesterday." Furthermore, "the base of action - the point of departure - at any step in the process is the entire organic complex of habits of thought that have been shaped by past processes. The . . . expression of each is affected by habits of life formed under the guidance of all the rest." Veblen (1899, 191) thus deduced:

Institutions are products of the past process, are adapted to past circumstances, and are therefore never in full accord with the requirements of the present. . . . At the same time, men's present habits of thought tend to persist indefinitely, except as circumstances enforce a change. These institutions which have so been handed down, these habits of thought, points of view, mental attitudes and aptitudes, or what not, are therefore themselves a conservative factor.

This relative stability and durability of habits and institutions made them key objects of evolutionary selection in the socio-economic sphere. Turning to the concept of selection, Veblen (1899, 188) famously promoted the idea that in social evolution there was a "natural selection of institutions":

The life of man in society, just like the life of other species, is a struggle for existence, and therefore it is a process of selective adaptation. The evolution of social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions. The progress which has been and is being made in human institutions and in human character may be set down, broadly, to a natural selection of the fittest habits of thought and to a process of enforced adaptation of individuals to an environment which has

progressively changed with the growth of community and with the changing institutions under which men have lived.

Veblen (1899, 207) wrote also of “the law of natural selection, as applied to human institutions.” Veblen (1900, 241) wrote elsewhere that the “ultimate term or ground of knowledge . . . is subject to natural selection and selective adaptation, as are other conventions.” Veblen (1898b, 188; 1900, 261, 217; 1906, 589) poignantly but infrequently applied the specific phrase “natural selection” to habits of thought or to social institutions. The central idea was that Darwinism could be applied to human society without necessarily reducing explanations of social phenomena entirely to psychology or biology.

Although Veblen used the phrase “natural selection” only a few times, words such as “select,” “selection” and “selective,” used in a Darwinian sense are used very frequently. I have counted well over a hundred appearances. A large number of these concern the selection of institutions, customs or habits of thought. Confining ourselves to the *Leisure Class* (Veblen 1899) alone, the following are a small sample:

In whatever way usages and customs and methods of expenditure arise, they are all subject to the selective action of this norm of reputability; and the degree in which they conform to its requirements is a test of their fitness to survive in the competition with other similar usages and canons (166).

There is a cumulative growth of customs and habits of thought; a selective adaptation of conventions and methods of life (208).

Social evolution is a process of selective adaptation of temperament and habits of thought under the stress of the circumstances of associated life. The adaptation of habits of thought is the growth of institutions . . . a process of selection . . . a selective process . . . (213-4).

This and much other textual evidence on his use of the concept of selection, along with his understanding of the importance of variation and inheritance in the Darwinian theory, supports decisively the proposition that Veblen generalized Darwinian principles to social evolution.

Veblen’s use of Darwinian terminology was *not confined to metaphor*. He made it clear that socio-economic systems *actually evolved* in a manner consistent with the Darwinian concepts of variation, inheritance and selection. He did not believe that Darwinian Theory was confined to nature. The difference between natural and social evolution was in the units of selection and in the details of the evolutionary processes, not in the exclusion of variation, inheritance or selection from the social sphere. For instance, Veblen (1896, 100) wrote: “The struggle for existence, and therefore the fact of selective adaptation, is in fact inseparable from the life process, and therefore inseparable from the life of mankind; but while its scope remains unaltered, the forms

under which it expresses itself in the life of society change as the development of collective life proceeds.”

Conclusion

Darwinism by itself is insufficient to provide full and complete answers, but it provides a general or meta-theoretical framework in which additional and context-specific explanations may be placed. Its further usefulness depends on additional and extensive work. Despite several earlier historical efforts, this research programme is still at the stage of elucidating the key concepts involved (Hodgson and Knudsen 2006c; 2008). While Veblen’s attempt to generalize Darwinism is incomplete and imperfect, he was one of the first to apply this framework to social institutions and structures, and we must build up the positive parts of his legacy.

Notes

1. This essay makes use of material from Hodgson (2003; 2004a; 2004c). The author is very grateful for comments at the presentation of this paper at the AFEE meeting in New Orleans in January 2008.
2. In his theory of instincts, Veblen did imply that some biologically inherited factors were relevant in partly explaining behavior. He also embraced a Darwinian stance on the concept of causality, which is discussed elsewhere (Hodgson 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c).
3. The idea of extending the range of Darwinian principles outside the biological sphere was later described by Dawkins (1983) and Dennett (1995) as “Universal Darwinism,” which may misleadingly suggest that Darwinism applies to everything. As explained below, Darwinian principles apply to complex population systems only, notwithstanding that this covers a highly capacious set of phenomena. The Dawkins-Dennett version sees the social unit of selection as the “meme,” while Veblen emphasized the selection of individual habits and social institutions. Earlier, Campbell (1965) developed the idea of a generalized Darwinism.
4. Another misconception is the idea that “artificial selection” is an alternative to, rather than an exemplar of, natural selection (Commons 1934, 121, 636, 638, 657). Other authors mistakenly believe that Lamarckism necessarily excludes Darwinism. For counter-arguments see Hodgson (2004a) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2006b).

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