

## Introduction

Clifford S. Poirot Jr.

### Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the scope, purpose, method and plan of this book, *Evolutionary Social Theory and Political Economy*. It first defines the different meanings of the terms “Evolutionary Social Theory” and “Political Economy.” Evolutionary Social Theory as the broad study of social change over time is contrasted with Evolutionary Social Theory in the more narrow sense of “Generalized Darwinism.” The multiple possible definitions of Political Economy are then provided. This study addresses the changing relationship between Evolutionary Social Theory, Political Economy and Philosophy of Science from the Enlightenment through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The study concludes by arguing for Evolutionary Social Theory as a form of empirical inquiry built on Cultural Evolutionism as opposed to Generalized Darwinism. The Philosophical foundations of this work lie in Critical Common Sensism, or Neo-Classical Pragmatism, rather than Critical Realism.

### Goal and Purpose of This Study

In contemporary biology the term evolution has a precise meaning: a change in the frequency of alleles in a population over time. Furthermore, evolution is distinguished from embryonic development and major morphological changes are theorized as continuous with the process of variation and selection within a population. This definition, derived from the Neo-Darwinian synthesis, provides both analytical rigor to the study of evolution and a means with which to quantify evolution (see for example Mayr 2001). Some have proposed that Evolutionary Social Theory should also be built on Darwinian, or Neo-Darwinian foundations: or in other words, that Evolutionary Social Theory should be envisioned as Generalized Darwinism (Carneiro 2003; pp. 179-184; Boyd and Richerson 1985, 1992). Amongst economists who write on Evolutionary Social Theory, this view is often traced back to the writings of Thorstein Veblen (Hodgson 2010; Jo 2021; Veblen 1919). Evolutionary Social Theory in this sense focuses on the study of how variable and socially heritable social routines are subject to a process of selection at multiple levels, thus resulting in change in the frequency of social routines over time leading in some instances to major social transformations.

But prior to the rise of the Neo-Darwinian synthesis, and for most laypeople today, the term evolution is defined more broadly to simply mean change over time. In this less restrictive sense, the term evolution is often associated with major morphological changes such as the evolution of modern humans from our shared common ancestor with modern apes. This looser definition does not necessarily distinguish between evolution and development. In the history of efforts to explain change both within a particular social system and the transformation of one kind of social system into another kind of social system, many Evolutionary Social Theorists have employed the looser definition of the term in the search for general principles that can explain the process of social change. As such, it has often had a global emphasis (Carneiro 2003, pp. 1-3). This looser meaning is broad enough to incorporate the above, narrower definition of Evolutionary Social Theory as one possible approach, yet also allows for comparison of the relative merits of differing approaches to the study of social evolution. For the purposes of this study, a theory in the social sciences need not be Darwinian or Neo-Darwinian to be considered evolutionary. Moreover, a theory that significantly predates the use of the term Evolution itself or biological theories of evolution can also be considered evolutionary.

Defined in this way, Evolutionary Social Theory can be distinguished from the use of abstract principles to study how a given social system, or subsystem functions. This is not to argue however, that the two approaches are necessarily opposed to each other. In the best of cases, the two approaches complement each

other. However, static theories that ignore historical specificity and are based on the application of abstract principles that have seemingly little relation to the actual object being studied, as is often the case in Economics as well as other social sciences, are unlikely to be particularly useful for either the static study of society or as a source of theory on which to base the study of social evolution. Evolutionary Social Theory clearly relies on History as a source for data. But it can be distinguished from atheoretical approaches to the study of history, or the view that human behavior is too variable and complex to be explained in terms of general principles. Evolutionary Social Theory is nomothetic, rather than idiographic. It is the study of the process of social change, both within a given Socio-Cultural System and the transformation of one kind of Socio-Cultural System to another using comparative and historical methods. In this process, it draws on all the social sciences as a source of theory. Evolutionary Social Theory also has a strong relationship to the idea that social order can emerge and change step by step, without conscious design. However, since the study of social evolution also entails the study of conscious, purposive agents, it does not preclude analysis of the role of conscious, purposive design of human institutions. Nor does it preclude the study of rapid, violent social change.

From its inception in the Enlightenment, Evolutionary Social Theory has had a particularly close relationship with Political Economy. But the term Political Economy defies easy definition. Rosseau (1759) had only the inklings of a theory of social evolution and defined Political Economy as an extension or generalization of the problems of household or estate management to the problems of the management of the State. Adam Smith had a theory of social evolution but his definition of Political Economy was more narrowly focused on the creation and distribution of wealth, structural change, as well as those policies which would augment the production of wealth (Smith 1776). Ricardo defined Political Economy primarily in terms of an abstract deductive analysis of concepts such as value, rent, wages, profits and other similar concepts. Marx (1859) had a similar definition and like Smith maintained a close connection between Political Economy and his theory of social evolution, or Historical Materialism. Others subordinated the concerns of Political Economy to Evolutionary Social Theory (Durkheim 1894; Steiner 2011). Some contemporary uses of the term Political Economy are nearly identical with the term Evolutionary Social Theory (Wolf 1982). These ways of defining Political Economy are all useful for Evolutionary Social Theory.

But while the term Political Economy is vague, it is clear that the relationship of Evolutionary Social Theory to Political Economy has varied over time and at times in ways that separated Political Economy from Evolutionary Social Theory. Johnathan Stuart Mill (1824) proposed a much narrower definition for Political Economy and advocated a separate method from Evolutionary Social Theory for Political Economy. Yet Mill still recognized the validity of Evolutionary Social Theory as did Alfred Marshall (1890) even if his understanding of social evolution was Spencerian, rather than Darwinian. This separation of Evolutionary Social Theory from Economic Theory was reinforced by Schumpeter (1954) who also, nevertheless, recognized the validity of Evolutionary Social Theory. At some point, the term Political Economy went out of favor, and Political Economy came to be known simply as Economics. Economics, as it is widely practiced and defined today by the mainstream is with a few exceptions limited to the application of formal, mathematical models to the study of economizing behavior under conditions of scarcity. This definition has been the dominant definition in contemporary Economics since at least the 1950's. These approaches to Political Economy and Economics are not particularly useful for Evolutionary Social Theory though the New Institutional Economics makes extensive use of mainstream concepts.

The acceptance of Evolutionary Social Theory in the other social sciences as well has waxed and waned over time. From the time of the Scottish Enlightenment as well as the later French Enlightenment, the predominant approach to Social Theory was evolutionary, in the sense I have defined it above (Meek 1976).

Evolutionary Social Theory developed further in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached its high water mark in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries following the publication in 1859 and 1871 of Darwin's *Origins* (1876) and *Descent* (1879). Nevertheless, as I will discuss later in this study, the influence of Darwin on Evolutionary Social Theory was less prominent than is often assumed. In the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century however, evolutionary approaches in all the social sciences were often pushed to the margins, a process that coincided with the rise of modern Economics and the separation of the social science disciplines from each other. The dominant approaches to the Social Sciences across the disciplines emphasized the use of static methods of analysis (Wolf 1982: pp 1-23; Chilcote 1994). Yet in the last several decades, there has been a revival of evolutionary approaches in all the social sciences, including Economics along with a revival of earlier and more useful definitions of Political Economy. This revival has also been accompanied by an increased interest in global applications. It has also been accompanied by a re-examination of the philosophical foundations of inquiry in all the sciences.

The goals of this study are to identify those factors that were most strongly associated with the rise, marginalization, and revival of Evolutionary Social Theory, how these changes influenced the relationship of Political Economy to Evolutionary Social Theory and to suggest possible directions for research in Evolutionary Social Theory in the future. Because this analysis implicates issues of Ontology and Epistemology as well as developments in the Physical and Natural Sciences, understanding these issues requires examination of the history of the relationship of Evolutionary Social Theory and Political Economy to each other as well as to developments in the Philosophy of Science. I argue that Evolutionary Social Theory was born in the Enlightenment as a form of empirical inquiry akin to empirical inquiry in the natural sciences, that it has developed best when posited as a form of empirical inquiry akin to empirical inquiry in the natural sciences. Moreover, its relationship to Political Economy is best thought of as symbiotic: Evolutionary Social Theory can inform Political Economy and Political Economy can inform Evolutionary Social Theory. This leaves a place for the use of abstract-deductive analysis of categories such as wages, rents, profits and economic growth that is specific to a given form of social organization and grounded in the actual characteristics of that form of social organization.

The above has ramifications for how we think about possible paths forward for Evolutionary Social Theory. One implication is that analogies between biological and social evolution face specific limits. Consequently, I express significant reservations about Generalized Darwinism and instead emphasize the continuity thesis and cultural emergence (Cordes 2007; Poirot 2007). The path forward I advocate for builds on contributions to Economic Anthropology, Historical Sociology and Global Political Economy. Another implication is with respect to how we think about the concept of open systems and realism in social theory. I express reservations about some aspects of Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1989; Collier 1994; Lawson 2003) and instead draw on Critical Common Sensism, or Neo-Classical Pragmatism (Haack 2006, 2007a; Poirot 2008; Webb 2007, 2012). A particular strength of Critical Common Sensism is that it unites ontology and epistemology and provides a theory of empirical inquiry.

Given the broad way I have defined Evolutionary Social Theory, the reader might fairly ask why use the term "evolution" at all when discussing theories of social change? While I share some of the standard reservations about over generalizing from biological evolution to social evolution, I am not opposed to all biological analogies in the social sciences. But I emphasize they are just that: analogies. When used with care biological analogies in the social sciences can help to shed significant light on important questions. There is much that social scientists can learn from biology. The opposite is also true. Finally, the term "Evolutionary Social Theory" is less awkward than "the interdisciplinary study of the process of historical change". I can see no reason why we should shrink from the use of the word "evolution" provided we keep the proper caveats in mind.

## **Scope and Method of this Study**

This study analyzes the arc of the development of Evolutionary Social Theory and its relationship to developments in Philosophy of Science and Political Economy from the Enlightenment through the early 21st century. I caution the reader that I do not offer a tight, linear narrative path. Instead, I develop a narrative that recognizes the zig zag and sometimes erratic nature of the path of the development and relation of ideas that takes account of the relevant qualifications, subtleties and exceptions. In developing the analysis of this study, wherever feasible, I have focused on representative works of important contributors, especially of those who in my estimation were or are pivotal in the development of particular lines of inquiry. As such, this study is selective both in terms of choosing the individual authors as well as which texts to emphasize. Unfortunately, I have had to omit multiple important and interesting theorists. In doing so, I have of course sought not to omit contributions that would substantively alter my analysis.

Prior to proceeding further, a few additional preliminary remarks may serve to prevent misunderstandings on the part of the reader. I am generally suspicious of imposing contemporary terms on eras where the categories that people used differed from our own. I am similarly skeptical of telescoping the present into the past. At the same time, the use of clumsy and awkward descriptions serves to distract from the main arguments. By the time of the Enlightenment and subsequently, authors were writing about issues that concern us today in ways that are intelligible to the modern reader. Consequently, I will often use terms that are meaningful to the modern reader to describe their view, even in cases where individual authors did not use those terms. However, in describing their views, it will be necessary in multiple instances to use terms to refer to non-industrial societies that we rightly reject today. While Philosophy and Philosophy of Science are not coterminous, there is a strong enough overlap between the two to justify not splitting that semantic hair. One semantic hair that I will split is that I will use Philosophy, rather than Methodology, when addressing ontological, epistemological and in some instances ethical arguments related to the Physical, Natural and Social Sciences. I will confine my use of the term “Methodology” to specific techniques of inquiry. Both for reasons of space, and in order to avoid clumsy circumlocutions, in the places where I address the contributions of Darwin, I will focus on Darwin’s role in developing a theory of evolution by natural selection though I readily acknowledge the role of Alfred Russell Wallace whose contributions certainly merit both more research and attention. That said, it was Darwin’s contributions that became influential.

## **Plan of this Study**

In addition to this introduction, this study is organized into six chapters. Each chapter addresses developments in successive time periods. In each case the beginning and ending dates are to some degree arbitrary, fuzzy and there is some overlap between time periods. Each chapter follows a similar order. I begin each chapter with a brief overview of important changes in the social order during the period. I then proceed to discuss developments in Philosophy of Science and then illustrate how these developments shaped the relationship between Evolutionary Social Theory and Political Economy in appropriate disciplines. Chapter One treats the time period from the beginning of the Enlightenment through the end of the French Revolution. Chapter two, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars up to and including the publication of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*. Chapter three addresses further developments through the end of WWI. Chapter Four analyzes developments from the end of WWI through the early 1970’s and Chapter Five from the 70’s up to today. Chapter Six briefly recapitulates the arguments of the previous chapters. I have provided summaries of each chapter immediately below.

In Chapter One I address the rise of Natural Philosophy in the late Renaissance and Enlightenment and its application to the study of human society in the form of Moral Philosophy. Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup>

century, at least in Britain in France, both Natural and Moral Philosophy came under the sway of Empiricist interpretations of the Newtonian world view. Though there was some overlap, especially in the writings of Montesquieu, two differing approaches to the study of Moral Philosophy emerged during this period: the abstract, mythological approach of Social Contract Theory and the empirical, grounded approach of Philosophical History. The latter approach can be considered as the genesis of Evolutionary Social Theory. Political Economy during this period was derivative of the more general approach of Evolutionary Social Theory. Evolutionary Social Theory provided better explanation than Social Contract Theory of the problems of the era and also provided a foundation for the concerns of Political Economy, especially in the writings of Smith and Turgot. In addition, the views of Condorcet pointed to the implications of a scientific world view for technological progress.

Chapter Two addresses the development of Evolutionary Theory in both the natural and social sciences, and its relationship to Philosophy of Science and Political Economy in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. I consider authors whose major contributions were developed either prior to, or concurrently with the publication of Darwin's *Origins* and *Descent*, as well as the contributions of Darwin himself. With the partial exception of Herbert Spencer, Empiricism and the closely related Positivism of August Comte were the predominant influences on Evolutionary theory during this period. Evolutionary Social Theory emerged as an integrated approach to the Social Sciences, that incorporated many of the concerns of Political Economy. Yet in spite of its roots in Empiricism and Positivism, Evolutionary Theory in this era was often speculative in nature, which reflected the prevailing influence of Lamarck. Nevertheless, it did provide concrete explanation of changes in social organization. In some instances, it was apologetic for the social order and in other cases it laid the foundations for criticism and reform of the social order. In contrast, Political Economy, as it was understood and practiced by British Political Economists, became increasingly separated from Evolutionary Social Theory both with respect to the scope and method of inquiry. It was in this intellectual milieu that Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Darwin's contribution, as well as that of Wallace, was to synthesize and refine both the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence for evolution, including arguments and empirical evidence drawn from Evolutionary Social Theory, and to recapitulate those arguments in a theoretically coherent and original concept of and explanation for evolution. The result was a novel theory of biological evolution based on the principles of common descent, gradualism, population thinking, variation and natural selection leading to a branching pattern of speciation. While Darwin's contributions had profound ramifications for all areas of inquiry, Darwin did not propose a new ethics of survival of the fittest. Rather, Darwin provided a naturalistic explanation for Smith's ethics based on sympathy for our fellow human beings. Yet Darwin's contributions went significantly beyond merely biologized Smithism.

In Chapter Three I discuss the state of Evolutionary Social Theory and its relationship to Political Economy in the immediate Post-Darwin era, or roughly, from 1871 through 1918. I first address the impact of Darwin on Philosophy of Science and contrast the views of Haeckel, the Empirio-Critics and of the American Pragmatists. Darwin's impact was strongest on the latter. However, Darwin had surprisingly little direct impact on Evolutionary Social Theory during this period and with the exception of Thorstein Veblen, the impact of Lamarckian understandings was actually more prevalent. Nevertheless, Pragmatist concerns were often present in the writings of multiple Evolutionary Social Theorists. Evolutionary approaches were prominent in the Sociology of this period as is evidenced in the contributions of William Graham Sumner, Lester Frank Ward, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Sociology during this period was envisioned as a general theory which could incorporate the concerns of Political Economy and included both social reformers as well as apologists for the social order. In contrast, due to the influence of Franz Boas, Anthropology began to move away from evolutionary explanations and became increasingly divorced from Political Economy. Political Economy as a discipline was shaped by three different approaches. Following Smith and Ricardo, Marx viewed Political Economy primarily as an abstract theory about the laws of

motion of the capitalist mode of production. However, his theory of Political Economy was tied to and dependent on his theory of social evolution, Historical Materialism, which was grounded in inverted Hegelian dialectics. Alfred Marshall continued in the tradition of Mill by emphasizing the separation of Political Economy from the broader approach of Evolutionary Social Theory, while retaining a Spencerian view of social evolution. In contrast, Thorstein Veblen built on American Pragmatism and applied Darwinian thinking to social evolution. Despite some differences between his views and those of the Sociologists referenced above, Veblen too proposed to subordinate Political Economy to his broader theory of social evolution. Though Veblen incorporated Darwinian analogies into his system, it is a mistake to view Veblen's contributions as "Generalized Darwinism".

Chapter Four addresses the factors that contributed to the relative marginalization of Evolutionary Social Theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, those factors that enabled it to survive and which contributed to its initial revival. I begin with a discussion of the differences amongst the logical positivists and between the logical positivists and Karl Popper. While noting the shortcomings of Logical Positivism, I argue that though its application to the Social Sciences contributed to the marginalization of Evolutionary approaches, it was not necessarily inconsistent with evolutionary approaches to social theory. In contrast, Popper's approach presented significant obstacles to evolutionary theorizing in the social sciences. However, the more damaging features were grand theory, naïve empiricism, physics envy and over formalization. The strongest inhibiting factor however was an overemphasis on the problem of social order and equilibrium which was characteristic of what for lack of a better term I will label technocratic progressivism. The factors that were favorable to the persistence and initial revival of Evolutionary Social Theory were emphasis on grounded empirical inquiry, the need to address social changes, a connection to Political Economy, and a critical view of the social order. I address how the above played out in the respective disciplines of Anthropology, Sociology, Economics and Political Science and note in particular how Economics, more than any other discipline, marginalized evolutionary approaches. (see Carneiro 1973; Harris 1968; Wolf 1982; Hodgson 2001).

In Chapter Five I address the resurrection of Evolutionary Social Theory with respect to developments in Philosophy of Science and Political Economy. I argue that better understandings of Philosophy of Science helped to enable the revival of Evolutionary Social Theory. I first discuss the contributions and shortcomings of the Neo-Positivist approaches of Kuhn, Lakatos and Laudan. While noting shortcomings in their respective approaches I argue that the net effect was to provide a justification for disciplinary pluralism. I then address the role of two possible alternatives to Neo-Positivism, both of which have a stronger connection to the re-emergence of Evolutionary Social Theory: Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1989; Archer 1995; Lawson 1997, 2003) and Critical Common Sensism as articulated by the Neo-Classical Pragmatist Philosopher Susan Haack (2007a, 2009). While noting areas of common concern I argue that because Critical Common Sensism provides a basis for a theory of empirical inquiry it is a more fruitful guide for Evolutionary Social Theory than Critical Realism. I then address the revival of Evolutionary Social Theory in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the rise and extensive impact of the Neo-Darwinian Synthesis and its possibilities and pitfalls of its extension to the social sciences. I address three possible approaches: Sociobiology (Wilson 1975; Pinker 2003), Generalized Darwinism (Hodgson 2004, 2010) and its relationship to the Veblenian-Schumpeterian synthesis in Economics (Nelson 2018), and Cultural Evolutionism as it has emerged in Economic Anthropology and influenced Macrosociology and International Political Economy. Though Generalized Darwinism and Cultural Evolutionism have significant points in common, Cultural Evolutionism places greater emphasis on the differences between Cultural and Biological Evolution but is certainly broad enough to incorporate the contributions of Veblen

and other Original Institutional Economists. I argue that this third approach provides the most fruitful path forward for the re-unification of Political Economy with Evolutionary Social Theory.

Chapter Six recapitulates the arguments of the previous sections and defends the conclusion of this study that the future of Evolutionary Social Theory should be as a component of a broader synthesis that builds on the reintegration of the social sciences.

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