

The Dynamic Society

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Snooks, Graeme Donald. *The Dynamic Society: Exploring the Sources of Global Change*. Routledge, London, 1996.

If it is valid for economic historians to analyse early civilisations, then why should they not consider also the economic history of pre-civilisations? Snooks assumes that the division of labour between economic historians and economic anthropologists is a matter of convenience rather than substance. However pre-civilised humans were merely one species among the many engaged in the struggle for survival, and the economic history of human pre-civilisation is part of the economic history of the early apes, which was in turn part of that of the mammals. By extending the principle, Snooks has incorporated the economic and evolutionary strategies of all life forms from the amoeba to the mammals to humanity into a unified and general schemata. He understands the biological struggle for survival to be essentially economic in nature, and concludes that economic motives can explain major biological processes. Finally he explains the rise and fall of civilisations in the same economic and biological terms.

Though Snooks has been greatly influenced by the Darwinian theory of evolution, one of his objects is to stand social Darwinism on its head. The social Darwinians locate volition at the level of the blind and selfish genes and conclude that all animals, including humans, are no more than walking gene bags. Snooks stresses that to the contrary all species have economic drives which they effect through strategic choices and dynamic interaction; whereas the social Darwinians argue we are like the animals, Snooks insists that the animals are like us. Consider the springboks of the Kalahari desert: According to David Attenborough and other social Darwinians, the antelope males fight for control of the small pockets of good grazing land to improve the chances of passing on their genes. However according to Snooks, the antelopes are quite indifferent to their genes, but they do like food and (after that) sex. Rather than being offspring maximisers, they resemble the self seeking, rational economic men who populate the arid conceptual desert of neo-classical economics. "The name of the game is Survival, and those who win are granted all the spoils - consumption and sexual gratification - while those who lose, lose everything" (p.72). He emphasises the dynamic aspects of the drive to survive, which he calls "the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within". Rational economic man becomes rational economic species, though humans have an extra range of responses, including technology, commerce and warfare, which go beyond individual struggle and genetic adaptation.

From this intellectual position Snooks criticises both biology and economic theory. The biologists erroneously put undue emphasis on the supply side and external circumstances, without appreciating the significance of dynamic endogenous systems. They explain new forms of life or the disappearance of old ones in terms of such prominent exogenous cataclysms as the early geological formation of a resource rich substrate, or subsequent cosmic collisions. However life processes do not respond only or even mainly to exogenous events, and Snooks argues that the dinosaurs did not become extinct because they were all destroyed by a comet, but because they had exhausted their evolutionary strategies and could no longer

adequately respond to the challenges issued by new forms of life. Likewise Rome did not fall because of the barbarian invasions, but because it was culturally committed to a strategy of territorial growth through warfare and capital accumulation through slavery, until that strategy was eventually exhausted.

Economic theory begins from the wrong level of abstraction. Snooks rejects Douglas North's theory that population and institutions have been the ultimate determinants of economic processes, because North failed to understand that both population and institutions are endogenous. Population can respond to new resource opportunities, as it did for example during the Palaeolithic period, and institutions are only strategic methods of meeting ulterior economic drives. Just as the springboks always put grass before sex, so the human drive for political power and its tendency to respect religious and institutional rules are only strategies towards an economic end.

The Dynamic Society is a speculative but intellectually stimulating work that reflects an extensive knowledge of biological and economic methodology. It begs comparison with Lewis Mumford's *Myth of the Machine*, which is another encyclopaedic analysis of dynamic social processes, but was directed towards an environmental end against centralism and the technological imperative. Snooks to the contrary warns the reader against a dark group known as the ecological engineers, who conspire to freeze the dynamic society and establish a biological stasis. He assumes that ultimately humans are *homo mercator* whereas Mumford assumed that humans are *homo faber*, but neither concept, taken alone, resolves the relation between ideas, ideals and material drives. Snooks repeatedly emphasises that intellectual systems merely rationalise self interested strategies, and yet his ostensible purpose is to protect the dynamic process from hostile human intervention. According to Snooks the best strategy is to bump up against the resources barrier and hope that some group's self interest will create a strategic breakthrough, thereby allowing the dynamic society to retain its dynamism.

But as usual an unqualified materialist philosophy raises puzzling questions. If the ecological engineers are simply pursuing their self interests, then why should Snooks object to any strategies which would merely express this universal dynamic drive? If on the other hand the ecological engineers are motivated by social ideals, then why are they exempt from self interest, and which other ideal-directed group is supposed to oppose them on behalf of nature and biological dynamics? As to values, why should I not prefer the cultivation of art and science, and the love of God and the world, instead of deferring to an automatic process that might replace humanity with nothing more exalted than an improved cockroach? And if I am merely self interested, why should I not join the ecological engineers? Snooks is never sure whether human beings are merely two legged predators like Plato's storks, or (when he is appealing against the ecological engineers) whether human society is predicated on some degree of commitment to truth and other higher concepts.

Yet despite these criticisms I have greatly enjoyed reading this book. Its arguments against biological determinism are intriguing, and it is stimulating to find the economic motive directed against the principles of traditional political philosophy with such vigour and conviction. *The Dynamic Society* gives evidence of an informed and creative mind, and its theories are worthy of serious intellectual engagement.

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