Book review
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BOOK REVIEW


by Johan M.G. van der Dennen

Evolutionarily-informed branches of traditional disciplines (such as evolutionary psychology, Darwinian psychiatry, human ethology, bioanthropology, bioeconomics, biosociology) abound nowadays and have achieved respectable academic status, sometimes after stubborn resistance of ‘orthodox’ scholars. Biopolitics, the biologically-informed branch of political science, established by Elliot White, Fred Willhoite, Thomas Wiegele, Albert Somit, Roger Masters and others (and by Pierre van den Berghe and Joseph Lopreato in sociology), and represented today by the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS), acknowledged the relevance of ‘proximate’ factors as revealed by genetics/genomics, neurophysiology and endocrinology (‘genes and hormones’ for short) for political science and international relations theory. However, the ‘ultimate’ dimension, the ‘why’ question, the ‘nature-of-human-nature’ question (why has natural – and cultural – selection produced a political and wargmaking animal arrogantly calling itself *Homo sapiens sapiens*?), using concepts like ‘reproductive success’ and ‘inclusive fitness’, was, for the most part, lacking. Bradley Thayer’s *opus magnum* has now, audaciously, filled this gap. Groundbreaking in both its scope and conclusions, *Darwin and International Relations* refocuses the study of international affairs through the lens of Darwinian evolutionary theory (i.e., evolution by means of natural selection; what Darwin himself liked to call “descent with modification”).

Thayer’s central argument is that evolutionary biology (consisting of genetics, cognitive or behavioral neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, human ethology [or behavioral biology], human or behavioral ecology, and Darwinian evolutionary theory) – acknowledging that human beings, like all other organisms, are evolved animals – contributes significantly to theories used in international relations and to the understanding of explanation of the causes of war and ethnic conflict. The benefits of such interdisciplinary scholarship are, potentially, enormous. Evolutionary theory and its relevance for social science is extensively discussed in the introduction and chapter 1 (“Evolutionary Theory and its Application to Social Science”).

In chapter 2 (“Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and Rational Choice”), Thayer explains how evolutionary theory contributes to the realist theory of international relations and to rational choice analysis. Traditional realist arguments rest principally on one of two discrete ultimate causes, or intellectual foundations of the theory. The first is Reinhold Niebuhr’s argument that humans are evil. The second, anchored in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau, is that human possess an innate *animus dominandi* – a drive to dominate. Thayer argues – convincingly in my opinion – that evolutionary theory provides a much stronger foundation for the realist argument that that used by either Morgenthau or Niebuhr. Evolutionary theory also gives rational choice theorists the first scientific foundation for their theory and affords a better understanding of human preferences and decision making. In chapter 3 (“Evolutionary Theory and War”), Thayer shows how evolutionary theory and human ecology allows us to comprehend why our ancestors would wage war for offensive and defensive reasons – to gain and to protect resources (including the always scarce resource of security) from attack.
Chapter 4 ("Implications of an Evolutionary Understanding of War") builds directly on chapter 3. Having explained the origins of warfare among humans, Thayer discusses the implications of warfare for human evolution, in particular the growth of human intelligence and human society. He explores warfare among other animals, particularly ants and chimpanzees, and argues that Carl von Clausewitz’s famous observation that war is politics conducted by other means is correct – wars certainly are conducted for political ends – but this definition of war obscures as well, precisely because it emphasizes the political aspects of warfare. The understanding of the origins of warfare provided by the life sciences lets us recognize that other animals fight wars, and that war evolved in humans because it is an effective way to gain and defend resources.

This is essentially what I (Van der Dennen, 1995, 2002) have called a “phylogenetic continuity” argument (as opposed to the traditional ‘cultural invention’ argument): Human beings did not have to ‘invent’ war (or its nonhuman equivalent); evolution by means of natural selection had done that long time before it ‘invented’ human beings – as demonstrated by ants and chimpanzees (and many other primate species).

In this chapter Thayer also examines how evolutionary theory helps explain the physically and emotionally stimulating effects of warfare on combatants. Lastly, he argues that a life science perspective allows scholars to understand why disease will become increasingly important in international relations as new diseases and new strains of existing diseases emerge and make biological warfare a progressively more effective weapon of war.

In this section Thayer attempts to show that disease significantly affects international relations, first by analyzing biological warfare, and, second, by examining the role diseases have played in human history and European imperialism. Bubonic plague, smallpox, anthrax, botulism, influenza, cholera, measles, typhus, and other pathogens have exterminated many millions of individuals and have decimated – and otherwise radically transformed – entire populations. The danger of epidemics will remain a significant national security concern in the near future.

In chapter 5 (“Evolutionary Theory and Ethnic Conflict”), Thayer uses evolutionary theory to explain why the in-group/out-group distinctions, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism evolved in humans, and in turn why ethnic conflict occurs and reoccurs in international relations. Moreover, the chapter provides important insights for scholars and policymakers who seek to prevent or mitigate ethnic conflict.

In the final chapter of the book Thayer provides some conclusions to the study and discusses an agenda for further research.

The central argument of Thayer’s book, he claims, is important for four reasons. First, it should be seen as a contribution to the project of applying evolutionary biology to social science in order to produce a new synthesis to explain human behavior.

The second contribution is in the realm of what methodologists term ‘theory improvement’. Evolutionary theory may be used to place some social scientific theories, specifically realism and rational choice, on a scientific foundation.

The third contribution concerns specific issues in international relations. He uses concepts from evolutionary biology to explain the origins of warfare and ethnic conflict.
And fourth, incorporating evolutionary biology into the discipline of international relations can benefit each of the levels of analysis traditionally used in the discipline, the first (the individual), the second or unit level (the state), and the third or systemic level (the international system).

Most themes and issues treated by Thayer (the evolutionary understanding of tribal warfare, intergroup and intercoalitional violence in animals, ethnocentrism/xenophobia and ethnic [sometimes genocidal] conflict, combat motivation and war atrocities) are neither novel nor original (Thayer honestly acknowledges his indebtedness to many ‘intellectual fathers’), but he has succeeded in a major synthesis of the evolutionary dimension underlying these phenomena. This book is obligatory reading for social and life scientist alike, and deserves to become a standard work in political science. It is also – and this is extremely rare for scientific works – a pleasure to read.

The book contains an index, 85 pages of notes, and a 45-pages bibliography.

References

Hobbes, T. (1651) Leviathan; or, the matter, form and power of a commonwealth, ecclesiastical and civil. London: Crooke.


