

Conference Review
Why Aren't the Social Sciences Darwinian?
Held May 2009 at University of Cambridge
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Why aren't the social sciences Darwinian? While Darwin's theory of evolution has permeated through the biological sciences during the last 150 years since the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the various branches of the social sciences - social anthropology, archaeology, sociology, psychology, economics, linguistics - have generally resisted evolutionary explanations of human behaviour, cognition, culture and society. The aim of this conference, held at the Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies, University of Cambridge and supported by the Galton Institute (along with the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities and the Mellon Foundation), was to explore possible answers to this question. Twenty speakers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds gave talks to an audience of almost 100 attendees, with talks ranging from historical and philosophical analyses to presentations of cutting edge contemporary research in the evolutionary social sciences.

The conference began with a keynote address by Michael Tomasello (Max Planck Institute), who gave an excellent overview of how evolutionary principles can illuminate aspects of human development, behaviour, cognition, language and culture. There then followed two days of talks that took a range of perspectives. Invaluable historical analyses were provided by Jamie Tehrani (University of Durham) on social anthropology, Geoffrey Hodgson (University of Hertfordshire) on economics and Felix Riede (University of Aarhus) on archaeology, while Raymond Corbey (Leiden University) and John van Wyhe (University of Cambridge) gave philosophical and historical perspectives on the traditional divide between the social and natural sciences.

Other talks presented state-of-the-art overviews of current evolutionary social science research: Robert Foley (University of Cambridge) on genetics and paleo-anthropology, Stephen Levinson (Max Planck Institute) and Simon Kirby (University of Edinburgh) on evolutionary linguistics, Alex Mesoudi (Queen Mary, University of London) on cultural evolution, Lewis Wolpert (University College London) on the evolutionary roots of supernatural beliefs, Gillian Bentley (University of Durham) on health and medical-related research, David S. Wilson (Binghamton University) on educational programmes and public policy, William Brown (Brunel University) on evolutionary aesthetics, Tim Lewens (University of Cambridge) on history, Robin Dunbar (University of Oxford) on human behaviour, and Robert Layton (University of Durham) on co-evolution and anthropology. Important notes of caution were expressed by Tom Dickins (University of East London) and Daniel Nettle (University of Newcastle), while Ruth Mace and George Perry (University College London) presented findings from a survey of attitudes towards evolution amongst social science students.

Collectively, these talks provided an illuminating and thought-provoking range of responses to the title question of the conference, and will no doubt stimulate further debate in the future. The conference has also generated a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, to which speakers at the event will contribute papers. My co-organisers (Robert Foley, Michael Lamb and Djuke Velduis) and I would like to thank all of the attendees, speakers and helpers who contributed to making this such a successful event.

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