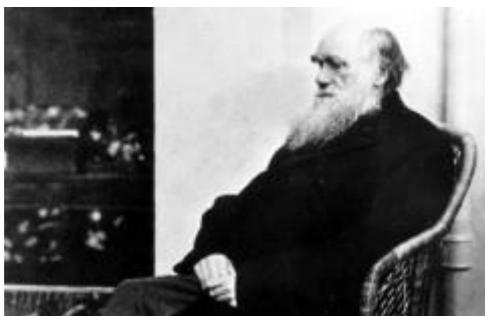


# Nature and human action

By José Eli da Veiga | for *Valor*, São Paulo 21/feb/2014



*Work of Charles Darwin is open to advances and controversies that Sanderson leaves aside*

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## **“Human Nature and the Evolution of Society”**

Stephen K. Sanderson. Westview Press. 464 p., US\$57,00

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The idea that social change necessarily entertains relations with human nature is very complex. In a few centuries a Brazilian society of masters and slaves has been deeply transformed, but, throughout this process, individuals and groups revealed many more stable and lasting behavior patterns than might be supposed.

Much attention, however: the overwhelming majority of social scientists continue to abhor this kind of conjecture, since social facts should be explained only for social reasons, without any interference from biological dimensions of human nature, according to basic principle constitutive of sociology, stated by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of its three main founders .

Of course, the fidelity to this principle had to decline, as it prevents that biologically determined behaviors might be considered social facts. A so unfair discrimination had inevitably to produce dissent. Today, the handful of sociologists angered by this anti-materialist bias of the discipline abandoned their own research societies. They much prefer enjoying stimulating interdisciplinary exchanges, fostered since the late 1980s, at other two associations: the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES), with its journal "Evolution & Human Behavior" ( [www.hbes.com](http://www.hbes.com) ), and the International Society for Behavioral Ecology (ISBE), with its journal "Behavioral Ecology" ( [www.behavecol.com](http://www.behavecol.com) ).

A thorough systematization of the main evidence from the scientific research done by members of these two societies is now available in this 12th book by sociologist Stephen K. Sanderson. For these evolutionists, the understanding of social change will remain very precarious if the scholars of humanities continue to despise, or even just underestimate, the relative weight of human nature. Mainly with respect to a set of 25 questions badly faced by the social sciences, ranging from those related to violence or marriage, to topics such as religion and arts, through the relationship between status and wealth, power and politics or, obviously, race and ethnicity .

Sanderson is an adept of Darwinism, but in an ultra-light version. He disagrees with eminent colleagues, for which the understanding of social evolution and biological evolution should rely on the very same theoretical basis, as proposed, for example, by Garry Walter Runciman, at Trinity College. Against this Darwinian generalization, Sanderson emphasizes even too

much the contrast between the three vectors of Darwinian biological evolution - genetic variation, selection, reproductive success - and the four most decisive material conditions of social evolution: ecological, demographic, technological and economic .

Several of his earlier publications were devoted to the arduous preparation of a hybrid theory, which he called "DCT" ("Darwinian conflict theory"), in which its tender Darwinian approach has been combined with the theoretical strategy of "cultural materialism", proposed in the late 1970's by his main inspiring teacher, the then influential anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927-2001). But the "DCT" is not even mentioned in this work launched by Westview Press.

Nor is there any reference in this new book to two Darwinian crucial debates that currently permeate life sciences and the humanities.

The first involves serious challenge to the powerful general theory of inclusive fitness, based on the assumptions of kin selection. This tends to reinforce the view that Darwinian selection can be multilevel, result of extremely unequal contradiction between individual selection and group selection.

The other has been aroused by the idea that Darwinism has four dimensions, because besides the much celebrated genetic selection, the focus of most research efforts, there is also epigenetic selection (inheritance that do not involve DNA) and behavioral selection. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that selection also occurs in the cultural context, called by some "symbolic" selection.

The explanation for the absence of "DCT" and these two debates in such an extensive systematization of empirical evidence must be in Sanderson's pedagogical ambition. In this sense, it is certainly a book that fits like a glove to the legions of skepticals about Darwinism that plague the humanities. In order to gain more readers the author squeezed into mere thirteen pages (of 464) just a quick overflight on the essential theoretical foundations.

So, if it is possible that something new may be at the same time as welcome as frustrating, this is certainly the case with this new release by Professor Stephen K. Sanderson, now at the University of California - Riverside. There really was a need for a work which clearly organized the evidence accumulated in four decades on the role played by nature in human action, because it continues to be ignored, and even vilified, by the countless disciplines that now divide the humanities. It is very sorry, however, that the price of such Herculean effort has been the unfortunate option to skip the promising theoretical controversies that emerged with the latest advancements of Darwinian studies.

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