

The Ephemeral Civilization: Exploring the Myth of Social Evolution. By Graeme Donald Snooks. London: Routledge, 1997. Pp. xiv, 585. \$125, cloth.

All people, argues Graeme Snooks, seek survival and prosperity. Societies can be characterized by the dominant strategy their elites pursue to achieve these timeless goals. There have been only four such strategies or “paradigms” to date: family multiplication, conquest, commerce, and technological change. Since the choice of strategy determines the economic and political systems of societies, social history can be reduced to the pursuit of these strategies, to their exhaustion, and their replacement by another of the four paths.

After warming up with 132 pages which lay out a new theory of human behavior, a new theory of institutional change, and foundational critiques of sociobiology and institutional economics, the book gets down to business on pages 133 to 418. Here Snooks applies his “four paradigm” theory to rewriting the histories of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, the Aztec Empire, Venice, England and the United States. England, for example, successively pursued the strategies of conquest, commerce, and technological change in the periods 1000 to 1300, 1480 to 1750 and 1760 to 2000. The earlier strategies were in turn exhausted, leading to a downturn in income growth rates at the end of each epoch, and their replacement by a new strategy. Pages 419 to 511 are devoted to the future. Snooks detects an accelerating pace of paradigm change. Thus soon, within a generation perhaps, we must witness the emergence of the “fifth paradigm.” The author sensibly refrains from speculating too precisely on the nature of the coming paradigm. But he is confident that a key element will a “Solar Revolution:” the replacement of energy based on depletable resources with solar energy. The author also predicts that the nation state will wither away to be replaced by mega-states: the European Union, ASEAN, Russia, China, and the USA. If however, these merge to form a single global state, then technical progress will end and the world will “return to the ancient dynamic strategy of war and conquest” (p. 491). Then we will apparently beat our solar ovens into

laser guns.

The madness in Snooks' method starts with his taxonomy of societies. Despite the 585 pages Routledge generously allows the author, he never gets around to specifying how exactly we identify a society's strategy, or the point of the exhaustion of that strategy. How do we know England from 1000 to 1300 was a conquest society? Presumably because its kings tried to profit by conquest, and engaged in recurrent warfare. Yet England in the years after 1480 was a commerce society despite recurrent warfare, acquisition of foreign territory, and a much greater expenditure on warfare as a share of GDP in the years 1692 to 1815 than the middle ages had ever seen. Ancient Rome was a conquest society, whereas ancient Greece was a commerce society. Since there was lots of commerce in ancient Rome, and lots of war in ancient Greece, what establishes the difference? Adding to the looseness of the taxonomy, societies are allowed to also pursue "sub-strategies." Medieval England was thus a conquest society with substrategies of commerce and technological change. Stuart England was presumably a commerce society with substrategies of conquest and technological change. Further Snooks notes that there is no necessary sequence in the strategies followed, and there is no predictable time before strategies get exhausted. Not surprisingly Snooks finds that his theory fits all the history he examines. But it is a theory that explains everything by predicting nothing: nothing at least about the past, where the predictions might prove false. Snook's boldest conjectures are reserved for the future.

To illustrate how plastic and accommodating "stratological" theory is, here are the steps required to construct a stratological analysis of any historical epoch. Suppose a society is deemed to be following the commerce strategy. Then precis the history from conventional sources, but add without explanation at frequent intervals phrases like, "as a result of the commerce strategy," "in response to the unfolding of the commerce strategy," "due to changes in strategic demand" or "in these changing strategic circumstances," or "as an outcome of the exhaustion of the commerce strategy."

Periodically sprinkle through the narrative portentous sounding but mysterious phrases such as “The driving force in the Ephemeral Civilization comes from the demand rather than the supply side” (p. 325) or “A successful dynamic strategy, well led, generates the strategic confidence that holds society together” (p. 328) or “The stratologist, however, knows that institutional change is only a secondary dynamic mechanism that derives its energy and direction from the unfolding dynamic strategy” (p. 490). Thus a conventional historical narrative for seventeenth century England might be:

Factor markets were transformed. A financial market centered on London developed in the late sixteenth century. Land became a more tradable commodity, with leasing arrangements less constricted by custom. Labor markets became increasingly responsive to supply and demand.

In the hands of the stratologist this would become:

Factor markets were transformed as a result of the commerce strategy. A financial market centered on London developed in the late sixteenth century in response to the unfolding of the commerce strategy. Land became a more tradable commodity, with leasing arrangements less constricted by custom due to changes in strategic demand. Labor markets became increasingly responsive to supply and demand in these changing strategic circumstances. The stratologist, however, knows that institutional change is only a secondary dynamic mechanism that derives its energy and direction from the unfolding dynamic strategy.

Repeat the formula for an appropriate number of pages replacing “commerce” with “conquest” or “technology” where desired, mail the result to Routledge, and you too can be a published “stratologist.”

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