Social evolution – does Darwin have all the answers?

We need the core principles of evolution – variation, selection and inheritance, to explain how social institutions emerge and adapt, says Professor Geoffrey Hodgson at the University of Hertfordshire. But he argues, Darwin's theories can't explain all aspects of social evolution.

The Core principles explain complex systems in human society, such as business firms which, as they evolve, retain and replicate problem solutions that are embedded in habits and routines.

As long as there is variation between businesses and institutions selection takes place, weeding out those less adapted to survive.

Such evolutionary processes cannot be explained adequately by using other theories, such as self-organization, artificial selection, or Lamarckian inheritance of acquired skills, argues Professor Hodgson.

What about the details?

Despite his overarching framework, Darwin's evolutionary theories are not sufficient on their own to explain the mechanisms in detail.

Biological evolution and social evolution are very different with regards to details. Some elements of social evolution require additional explanations.

Nevertheless, social evolution involves populations of entities, including customs and social institutions, competing for scarce resources – which means social evolution largely adheres to Darwin's theories.

Further reading

- Geoffrey M Hodgson, Thorbjørn Knudsen: "Why we need a generalized Darwinism, and why generalized Darwinism is not enough" (Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization, Vol. 61, 2006)

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