

# Book Reviews

*Aldrich, Howard* **Organizations Evolving**  
Sage 1999 432pp. £55.00 (hardback)  
£17.99 (paperback)

The debate over the value of an evolutionary perspective has come to dominate a number of social science disciplines – notably psychology. This book is a contribution to the debate within organizational theory written by one of the chief proponents of an evolutionary approach to organizational analysis. The book is clear and well written and provides both an excellent review and a development of the literature in this field. But what does it mean to say organizations 'evolve'? Is it not the case that organizations are nothing more than a social construction, a discursive construction even? Organizations are not analogous to biological species; they have no genetic structure to determine their evolutionary path. Obviously Aldrich is employing a metaphor but just how valuable is the metaphor to understanding organizations?

Aldrich attempts an answer in the second chapter where he proposes the use of the key concepts of variation, selection, retention and struggle. Variation may be intentional where agents within organizations seek solutions to problems or blind where variation occurs through mistakes or by chance. Selection can be external via competitive pressure from the market or internal such as that generated by pressure towards homogeneity in organizational practices. Selected variations then become preserved or replicated. Underpinning all

of these processes is the notion of struggle over these resources both within and between organizations. This rather stark summary does not do justice however to the subtlety of Aldrich's argument. First he notes how organizational members are not passive victims of the wider environment. They can and do manipulate that environment to survive and prosper. Second, the existence of any particular forms of organization or organized routines are no guarantee that these forms are 'superior' or 'the best fit'. As Aldrich states: 'Rather their forms reflect the historical path laid down by a meandering drift of accumulated and selectively relevant variations' (p. 33).

In the chapter that follows, Aldrich examines some other theories of organizations through his evolutionary lens. He draws extensively on these theories and this gives his own perspective a degree of richness. At the same time, he claims that his evolutionary perspective provides an 'overarching framework'. There is more than a hint that the same evolutionary process that applies to organizations should also be applied to theories *about* organizations. Later chapters extend the argument to populations of organizations in particular sections or niches, how populations increase/decrease and how organizations become linked into communities or networks.

What are the merits of this approach? Any metaphor helps to frame our understanding in a partial way. The evolutionary metaphor draws our attention to the way

that both individual organizations and populations of organizations change. Aldrich is correct to say that most of organizational studies looks at large organizations not small ones. But most large organizations started small and an evolutionary approach highlights the origins of organizations.

The problems with Aldrich's approach can be captured in the opening sentence of the fourth chapter: 'People construct organisations to accomplish things they cannot do on their own' (p. 75). In this sentence there is no inkling that an overwhelming majority of the population do not 'construct organizations'. Rather they find themselves going to work in organizations created by others and often for purposes in which they have no interest. In short there is no consideration of the social structural context in which organizations are 'created' and sustained (other than the selective process of a competitive market). Consequently there is no treatment of power in the book.

Moreover there is a tendency to treat organizations as social facts which I suspect is part of the baggage of employing an evolutionary perspective. His definition of organizations is that they are 'goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity' (p. 2). But it is clear that once constituted, they obtain a certain factual solidity. For example, a whole chapter of the book is devoted to the need to construct and maintain 'organizational boundaries'. Now this is at odds with the recent linguistic turn in organizational analysis which sees organizations as much more of a discursive construction (see Jackson and Carter's 'Rethinking Organisational Theory' for a very accessible approach to such an analysis). A linguistic perspective argues that any form of boundary construction is a cognitive act designed to establish meaning rather than recognition of some pre-existing, natural form. This applies just as much to the boundary drawn between 'organization' and 'environment', which is so central to an evolutionary approach. Curiously, even if one accepts Aldrich's argument in his own terms, his description of how such boundaries operate looks backwards rather than

forwards. He describes, for example, how masses of people move from home to work each day (and then back again) (pp. 114-15). Yet modern organizational forms such as remote and contingent working are breaking down these boundaries.

In spite of these criticisms I would recommend this text as an excellent source book to anyone who is already immersed in organizational studies and aware of its plurality of perspectives. To those less well versed in the discipline, my advice would be to start elsewhere. In spite of its claims to do so, the evolutionary approach does not provide an overarching framework.

*Michael Brocklehurst  
The Management School,  
Imperial College*

**Bruce, Steve Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice** Oxford University Press 1999 247pp. £35 (hardback)

Given the apparent inability of the orthodox secularization perspective to explain the high and stable levels of American religiosity, a small but prolific band of Americans have advanced a heretical rational-choice alternative (often described as the 'supply side' approach). In his new book, Steve Bruce attempts to defend the orthodox position by recounting the empirical and historical evidence for secularization and restating various critiques of the rational-choice approach.

While the book's subtitle might suggest otherwise, Bruce's primary target is not the rational-choice approach in toto but some particular supply-side theories that draw heavily upon market imagery. Moving beyond metaphor, one central supply-side claim could (and probably should) be derived from a simple product-differentiation model (drawn from industrial organization economics). In this model, each religious producer is located at some point in a (multidimensional) space of product attributes. Similarly, each religious consumer has an ideal point in this product space (reflecting the type of religion she would most prefer). Given the (wide and stable) distribution of consumer preferences, producers compete with each other by (interactively) choosing their