

*Organizations Evolving*, by **Howard Aldrich**.  
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Over the past decade, the comparative study of organizations has come to be conducted less within sociology departments and more within business schools. While this is more obviously a demographic than an intellectual phenomenon, it also involves a substantive shift toward managerial and strategic concerns. In *Organizations Evolving*, Howard Aldrich provides a broad base for a new and continuing sociology of organizations.

*Organizations Evolving* moves easily across a wide range of issues, from the characteristics of nascent entrepreneurs, to the impact of large-scale social change, to the formation of organizational communities. En route, many points of contact with core sociological concerns are visited. For example, Aldrich emphasizes how the key role of social networks enables white males to be better placed to found organizations. The definition of organizational boundaries is viewed as a Goffmanesque social process rather than as an exercise in transaction costs economizing.

Much sociological work on organizations involves dialogue with notions of organizational rationality and effectiveness. It is plausible that organizational structures and routines arise because they work well, a line of argument that is hardly considered when sociologists study inequality, culture, or politics. Sociological schools of organizational analysis tend to develop complex approaches to questions of efficiency, from population ecology's model of the environment as selection mechanism to institutionalism's model of the organization as a cultural depiction of rationality.

Aldrich offers an evolutionary perspective as a synthetic framework for organizational analysis. While sharing much with the ecological approach (and other schools of organizational analysis reviewed in Chapter 3), Aldrich's evolutionary model represents a different take on what is sociologically interesting about organizations and how to understand organizational rationality and effectiveness.

The evolutionary approach is presented in the

terms of Donald Campbell's variation-selection-retention scheme, with an additional element of struggle: explicit rivalry and political contestation. This scheme helps to organize questions and suggest implications. For example, Aldrich notes that gender and race biases in who founds organizations restricts organizational diversity. The possibility of organizational transformation is examined with an eye to the role of selection versus adaptation in generating population-level change.

While Campbell's scheme organizes many of the questions posed in *Organizations Evolving*, I thought a different set of ideas produced the answers. Aldrich is concerned with describing how complex relational structures are constructed out of simpler ones. Organizations are described as forming around pre-existing social networks and schemas. The consolidation of an organizational interaction order is treated as a contingent process of building a community of practice. Organizational populations construct collective associations that represent the population and expand its resource base.

Aldrich's implicit argument is thus all about emergence. The construction of new levels of organization is a creative and contested act. It is also structured by the social resources (relational ties) and cultural resources (shared schemas) that actors can draw on. This is an evolutionary perspective, but one in which it really is the organizations that are doing the evolving. It is an approach that has more in common with ideas about learning, resource mobilization, and self-organizing processes than ideas about random variation and selection pressure.

The relevance and ease of application of this version of evolutionary argument is telling. Howard Aldrich's *Organizations Evolving* provides both an overarching research vision and a review of the field, and would work well in both undergraduate and graduate classes. Most important, it offers a perspective on organizations that is evidently fruitful.