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Graeme Donald Snooks. *The Dynamic Society: Exploring the Sources of Global Change.* New York and London: Routledge, 1996. xvii + 491 pp. $160.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-13731-7; $240.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-13730-0.

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For most of the time in any discipline the mundane dominates, and the subject seems to advance at a glacial pace. Old disputes are chewed over, small concessions gained and conceded. There are no sweeping visions, no sustained programs of discovery. The subject is maintained almost as much by institutional inertia as by intellectual passion. Economic history in the eyes of many is firmly stuck on just such hard and unyielding terrain. No one has published a paper yet entitled "The Heights of Norwegians Inferred from a Sample of 23 File Clerks, 1906-1908: A Quantile Bend Estimate," but given enough time they will.

There is thus always an incipient demand for bolder conjectures, for the big idea that can inject excitement and remake the subject. But pursuing the big idea, seductive as it is, has its dangers. The big idea is inevitably at the beginning ill-formed, and weakly supported. Thus those who venture the big idea need strong egos and selective blindness–they have to withstand the carping of the Lilliputians, and the rejection of the journal referees. But at the same time the ego cannot be too strong, the vision too selective. Therein lies a kind of madness. The innovator has to be able to respond to criticism, but not be overwhelmed by it, to connect with the audience yet not become its servant. The pursuer of the big idea has to walk the thin line between hearing too well and being deaf to reason.

It was thus with some trepidation that I read early in Graeme Snooks' new book that "we need a simple but robust model that can explain the emergence and development of life over the last 4 billion years" (p. 7). It was with even more fear that I noted at the end of the book on page 431 a ten-page glossary of "Snookspeak," including "great linear waves of economic change," "existential models," "funnel of transformation," "strategic-crisis hypothesis"–the new language we need to express the "simple but robust" theory. There was going to be no middle ground for the reviewer of this book–no "a solid contribution to the literature on developments in animal husbandry, which perhaps focuses a little too much on sheep." Snooks has reached for the big prize. He is either an innovative visionary, or he has crossed over the line into self-delusion. For what Snooks attempts in this book, aided only by pen, paper, and frequent trips to the glossary, is to produce a theory of life that encompasses and surpasses all of economics, biology, history, psychology, and sociology. To raise the stakes even further, this improbable concoction is emblazoned with warm commendations from no less than Douglass North, Nobel Laureate, Baron Herman van der Wee, and Stanley Engerman.

What is Snooks' new post-Darwinian theory of life and everything? There is at maximum one person who knows, and if he does know, he is unable to communicate it. This is not a case where I can outline the theory, and then ask how well it corresponds to what we know. What the theory is is the central mystery. For example, the theory, Snooks states, employs existential as opposed to deductive models:

"Existential models are empirical models of reality–or models of existence–and can be contrasted with the logical or deductive models of physics and economics, which are merely constructs of the mind.... As existential models are based upon dynamic timescapes, they can liberate us from the limitations of deductive thought. They set free the imagination to range over the actual patterns of existence. And in these patterns we can see the dynamic processes of reality" (pp. 433-34).

In California we have many examples of people liberated from the limitations of deductive thought, and often they too have important ideas they need to tell us. So it turns out that Snooks not only wants to rewrite the history of the last four billion years; he also, *en passant*, is introducing entirely new modes of thought, which should, maybe after some refinement, be able to effect a substantial reformation of the physical sciences.

The above example is the book at maximum wackiness. There are many parts, even whole pages, where the exposition is clear: the discussions of crustal forma-

tion (yes, the crust of the earth), Hitler's aims (irrational), the oxygen content of the atmosphere, aggression in men and women (as evidenced by auto accidents), the walls of Jericho, blue-green algae, Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862), sea level changes, the Holy Roman Empire, post-Keynesians, the Ice Age, linear time, volcanic eruptions, the nuclear family, Nietzsche, Joel Mokyr, dinosaurs, dolphins, and the Domesday Book, to name a few examples. The only problem is what the connection of the episode at issue is to the big idea. I know the theory is dynamic, which is why the front cover has charging horses on it, whereas Darwin was static. Dynamism is everywhere–more than one page of the index alone is devoted to dynamism in all its varieties, including "dynamics of the earth: formation of crust." Change, we learn, occurs because of dynamism. I also learned that the theory is "economic," and that it involves "paradigm shifts," but the theory itself remains hidden from the view of a reviewer trapped in the prison of deductive logic.

To take a specific example, Snooks argues, with some persuasion to someone whose knowledge of the subject is limited to the *New York Times*, that the attempt by many scientists to explain the extinction of dinosaurs by natural catastrophes is unconvincing. But what is Snooks' alternative explanation? Dinosaurs were doomed, he assures us, by "having exhausted their dynamic strategies" and further, dinosaurs "suffered from over-expansion owing to the exhaustion of their dynamic opportunities" (pp. 77-78). And that's it. With those trenchant observations, Snooks, having dispatched the dinosaur issue between pages 76 and 78 as rapidly as an asteroid impact, marches quickly on to tackle the bigger problems. The survival of some organisms, largely unchanged, from long before the era of the dinosaurs is, I presume, because they did not exhaust their dynamic opportunities to not change. Aristotle, who claimed that objects fell toward the earth because it was in their nature to fall, looks like a model of positivist science compared to Snooks.

Another example, closer to the workaday concerns of economic historians, is "technology as a dominant dynamic strategy."

"The technological paradigm shift is a widespread human response–occurring in both the Old and New Worlds–to critical episodes in the relationship between population and natural resources owing to the exhaustion of the prevailing technological paradigm. A paradigm shift involves a technological transformation that provides, in a relatively short space of time–when looking forwards rather than backwards–a quantum leap in access to the resources of a niggardly natural world" (pp. 239-40).

Leaving aside the interesting metaphysical claims about time, what is the content of this view?- Snooks claims there have been only three technological paradigm shifts: the shift from scavenging to hunting in the Paleolithic, the shift from hunting to agriculture in the Neolithic, and the shift from agriculture to industry in eighteenth-century England. He argues that each shift is created by changes in relative factor prices. Now of course, for the first two shifts we know nothing of factor prices. Indeed, again based only on the authority of the *New York Times*, it has just been discovered that the shift from scavenging to hunting occurred about 100,000 years ago, much earlier than previously thought. Does this matter to Snooks' theory? Not as far as I can tell. When the shift occurred it was undoubtedly the result of population pressure and a stagnant scavenging technological paradigm.

So the only paradigm shift for which we have any evidence on relative scarcities is the Industrial Revolution, the cause of which was "with the growing pressure of population on natural resources, as the old technological paradigm was progressively exhausted, came a rise in prices: of natural resources relative to labour; of labour relative to capital; and of organic relative to inorganic natural resource" (p. 265). This claim is at least clear, but is both theoretically and empirically implausible. Why should population pressure raise the price of labor relative to capital? Why did not population pressure in the High Middle Ages spark an Industrial Revolution? Why was the Industrial Revolution not in China? And empirically the substitution of inorganic for organic resources in Britain before 1850 was a trivial element of the Industrial Revolution, as the work of von Tunzelman, McCloskey, and Crafts clearly shows. But as with the demise of the dinosaurs, Snooks can only allocate about three pages of the book to his discoveries about the Industrial Revolution paradigm shift before he has to rush on to bigger things.

I could go on, but this is enough to convey the point. As we go about the mundane tasks of economic history, trying to prise the occasional nugget of knowledge from hard and stony ground, I am sure we will hear periodically from Graeme Snooks. He will come zooming past, gesticulating wildly and shouting excitedly about new marvelous discoveries made from the comfort of his armchair: discoveries that only he, and possibly Doug North, Herman van der Wee, and Stan Engerman, can see and share.

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