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John Laurent
Griffith University

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I found this a readable, interesting, but in the end peculiarly perplexing book. Perhaps that is what the author intended? Graeme Snooks, Coghlan Research Professor of Economics at the Institute of Advanced Studies at ANU, has something of a reputation for big ideas drawn from a very long-run view of history. This reputation will not be diminished by this book, which presents what Snooks considers are the lessons to be learnt from 'human' (hominid might be better) history stretching back 1.6 million years - to what Snooks calls the first major technological revolution: the change from a pre-palaeolithic (scavening) to a palaeolithic (hunting) mode of life, which the author says took 1.2 million years to spread around the globe. The next two most important technological revolutions, in Snooks’ view, were the neolithic (agricultural) and industrial revolutions, beginning 11,000 and 200 years ago respectively.

One may wish to quibble about the absence of other major technological breakthroughs in this scheme (the discovery of metals independently by various cultures, for instance - see eg, Delmonte 1985), and the dating (Flannery 1995, says that subsistence agriculture was practised in New Guinea up to 30,000 years ago), but however this may be, some readers will also find problems with another dimension to Snooks’ long-term view of history. That is, his classification of periods of economic growth as being due to one or more of four dominant 'strategies': the 'family multiplication strategy' of procreation and migration (which Snooks says characterised the palaeolithic period), conquest, commerce, and technological change. Such a scheme seems overly simplistic, and indeed the various illustrations from history provided by Snooks do little to allay this impression. The different 'strategies' argued for tend to become blurred in the historical cases he cites. Thus, according to Snooks, Venice is the most successful example of a 'pure' commerce society that we can find, yet he immediately goes on to tell us that ‘The most remarkable of the Crusades was the Fourth in 1202-4, which was skilfully diverted by Venice in order to do what the Infidel had failed to do, namely to sack the Christian city of Constantinople and dismember the Byzantine Empire. In the process Venice acquired three-eights of the entire empire’ (pp. 64-5). Similarly, on page 72, in an account of Tudor England’s war with Spain, we are informed that 'Conquest and commerce societies cannot coexist', yet on the very next page we read that the Wars of Spanish Succession, in which England was heavily involved,
'advanced England’s commerce strategy'.

This word 'strategy' is very important for Snooks. It is in fact a key part of the central argument of his book, which is that throughout history economic growth (or as Snooks puts it for earlier periods, human survival and prosperity) has always depended on what Snooks calls 'strategic leadership', be that in the sphere of population strategies, conquest, commerce or technological change. This being so, according to Snooks, the current call from neoliberal economic 'experts' in bodies like the IMF and World Bank for 'structural adjustment' (deflation) for countries experiencing balance of payments problems are not only misguided but are a recipe for disaster. Snooks does not mince words on this matter. His argument is summarised in the last two paragraphs of his Introduction:

'Modern governments have forgotten why their institutions emerged at the dawn of human civilisation and why they have been maintained at the taxpayers’ expense ever since. They have forgotten that their primary role is to facilitate the objectives of the strategists … [This book] shows how the neoliberal experts can be dispensed with, how strategic leadership can be rediscovered … and what policy instruments should be employed…[The] future choices facing our civilisation are considered. It is concluded that if we fail to remove the [neoliberal] crisis makers, and refuse to adopt the new strategic way, there can be no doubt that, in the immediate future, we will witness an end to progress and liberty throughout the world.'

'Look at history', Snooks stresses again and again throughout this book, 'if you wish to know why you should listen to the strategists rather than the experts' (p. 139). Failure to do so, Snooks tells us, 'could cause the collapse of Western civilisation' (p. 151) - a dramatic warning which he repeats a number of times: 'Failure to change our vision will cause … the fall of Western civilisation' (p. 20); the current trend to follow the advice of neoliberal experts 'threatens to destroy modern society' (p. 25); the world is 'destined for collapse' unless the role of strategic leadership is rediscovered (p. 57).

What does Snooks mean by 'strategic leadership'? This is not always clear, and in any case appears to mean different things for the different periods of history with which he deals. Thus the phrase can refer to, in the current Australian contact, governments providing the necessary 'strategic infrastructure' for economic growth - specifically, investment at the theoretical and research end of the technological infrastructure spectrum including in higher education in science and engineering, technological change today playing 'the same dynamic role as conquest or commerce in
the pre-modern world' (p. 145). This sounds alright, except that Snooks seems to want to acknowledge a legitimate role for these other kinds of strategies in the past also. A discussion of ancient Rome (in a chapter on ‘The Universal Role of Strategic Leadership’), for example, argues that this conquest - based society 'never forgot the essential role of strategic leadership and never required the services of economic experts'. The empire finally fell 'not because its strategists and strategic leaders failed, but because they were remarkably successful in exploiting their dynamic strategy to the full' (and finally exhausted the possibilities of their conquest strategy) (pp. 62-3). What are the lessons for a modern democracy in this case study?

There are, nevertheless, worthwhile points made by Snook in this book. One of these is that human nature and society are hardly ever adequately taken into account in the mechanistic concepts of classical and neo-classical microeconomics, which 'assume that human society is a giant factory dominated by the machine' (p. 36). This is not surprising, Snooks says, given that such has been the model of most major economists since Alfred Marshall and Karl Marx. We need to formulate a more realistic model, Snooks argues, one which allows for the 'biologically determined desire of materialist man (very different to the artificial *homo economicus* [sic] of neoclassical economics) to survive and prosper by investing in the most effective available dynamic strategy' (p. 38). Such a model, Snooks says, would more effectively accommodate the 'dynamic process [involving] an interaction between the forces of competition and co-operation' (p. 39). Snooks is doubtful whether Keynesian demand-side macroeconomics has much to offer in today's globalised marketplace, though at least 'old Keynesians' had a 'wider vision of the economy as a social entity' (p. 130).

Much of what Snooks has to say could possibly fit fairly comfortably into some of the newer evolutionary approaches in economics; however, he seems to be consciously eschewing these. Notwithstanding his complaint that the 'neoclassical cult' possesses a flawed view of the world, in that it treats human society as a giant factory and in a static rather than dynamic way, dominated by concepts of equilibrium and order rather than by disequilibrium and change, he uses the term 'evolution' only twice (I think) in the book. Where he does, it is in historic rather than in societal contexts, as in a discussion of Marxian notions of a 'unidirectional and irreversible' economic succession from feudalism to mercantile capitalism and industrial capitalism - views which Snooks dismiss as 'incorrect' (the British industrial revolution, he says, was unique and only occurred 'because the exhaustion of the commerce strategy coincided with
the exhaustion of the global neolithic paradigm' - p. 73)

Snooks’ book then, cannot be easily categorised, and as such will no doubt annoy economists who feel allegiance to one or other of the schools Snooks castigates. Most obvious of these will be the neoliberals Snooks condemns as the 'crisis makers' of today’s world. Perhaps someone among their number might be provoked into a spirited reply? I await this with interest.

By John Laurent
Griffith University

References

