Introduction

W.G. Runciman’s *Treatise on Social Theory* is one of the finest works in its field published over the last fifty years. It is a rich, capacious, magisterial work in three volumes and 1,200 pages. My purpose in this paper is not to assess the work overall, nor to offer an account of its author, who is a fascinating figure in his own right, but to engage the argument in the *Treatise* on a narrower front, at its places of closest approach to historical materialism.

Runciman’s point of departure is the view that ‘there is no escape from the recognition that any substantive social theory is and cannot but be evolutionary’, which means that ‘although biological theory cannot explain the structure and culture of human societies directly, the process of social evolution is both continuous with, and analogous to, biological evolution.’

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1 Runciman 1989a, p. 37 and Runciman 1989b, p. 12, respectively. For further reflections by Runciman on the evolutionary analogy, see Runciman 1989a, pp. 38, 296; the ‘Introduction’ to Runciman, Smith and Dunbar (eds.) 1996, pp. 1–8 and Runciman 1998. For an excellent recent critique of Runciman’s work see Chattoe 2002.

I am grateful to Paul Wetherly for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
I share this view, but I will not defend it here. I am interested primarily in the manner in which Runciman cashes out his claim to develop a social theory that is analogous to neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology, and the relationship of his theory to the version of historical materialism I favour, which is centred on the concept of competitive primacy.

My conclusions will be that:

(i) Runciman’s analysis of long-run historical trends is consistent with historical materialism, his occasional diatribes to the contrary notwithstanding;
(ii) Runciman has a flat-pack problem, in that he has chosen the right elements for his social theory, but has assembled them in the wrong order;
(iii) social power is less central to historical development than his theory supposes.

Runciman has a great deal nevertheless to offer contemporary historical materialism, and contemporary historical materialism perhaps has something to offer Runciman in return.

The compact statement and the biological analogy

The following excerpt (hereafter ‘the Compact Statement’) offers the most compact statement of Runciman’s social theory:

Briefly, my [view] is that the process [of social evolution] is one of competitive selection whereby certain roles and institutions come to replace or supersede others; that the units of selection are not roles or institutions but the practices of which classes, status-groups, orders, factions, sects, communities, age-sets and so forth are the carriers; that their function lies in maintaining or augmenting the power which attaches to the roles and thereby institutions which they constitute and thus in preserving or changing the mode of the distribution of power in societies (or ‘social aggregates’ or ‘social formations’) taken as a whole; and that the direction which evolution has thus far taken has in consequence been one of both increasing and diminishing variation –

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2 For a preliminary defence see Carling 1998.
4 See, for example, the attacks on Immanuel Wallerstein as a representative Marxian ‘Attitude-Merchant’ and on John Westergaard and Henrietta Resler for ‘attitude-peddling’ in Runciman 2000, pp. 61 and 200 respectively.