

GARRY RUNCIMAN

Walter Garrison Runciman

10 November 1934 – 10 December 2020

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1975

by

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Summary. Contributions to academic literature were only one component of the role of Garry Runciman, Third Viscount Runciman of Doxford, in British public life. He was also a senior figure in the shipping industry, active in a number of social causes, and chair of a major royal commission. Yet those academic contributions were major and extensive. Various of his writings could be classified within a number of disciplines: classics, philosophy, political theory, sociology. Yet he chose the least fashionable of these – sociology – as his primary academic identity. He once pointed out that he was ‘the first sociologist in the hundred-year history of the British Academy to be elected its President’ (served 2001–05). Within British sociology he came to adopt what he called a neo-Darwinian position – an easily misunderstood term. Although he made major contributions to social theory, he once described himself as a ‘reluctant theorist’, as he believed that theory needed to be rooted in and to emerge from empirical study. He thus reached across that frequent divide among sociologists, just as he reached across and integrated different disciplines. As well as a major intellectual figure, he was also a thoroughly independent one, defying attempts at categorisation.

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W. B. Rumsfeld

Contributions to academic literature were only one component of Garry Runciman's role in British public life. He was also a senior figure in the shipping industry, active in a number of social causes, and chair of a major royal commission. Yet those academic contributions were major and extensive. Various of his writings could be classified within a number of disciplines: classics, philosophy, political theory, sociology. Yet he chose the least fashionable of these – sociology – as his primary academic identity. He once pointed out that he was 'the first sociologist in the hundred-year history of the British Academy to be elected its President'.¹ Within British sociology he came to adopt what he called a neo-Darwinian position – an easily misunderstood term. Although he made major contributions to social theory, he once described himself as a 'reluctant theorist', as he believed that theory needed to be rooted in and to emerge from empirical study. He thus reached across that frequent divide among sociologists, just as he reached across and integrated different disciplines. As well as a major intellectual figure, he was also a thoroughly independent one, defying attempts at categorisation.

Runciman was born, in London, into the north-eastern shipping family founded by his great-grandfather, Walter (later Lord) Runciman in 1889. His grandfather, also Walter, was a senior Liberal politician in the 1899 to 1939 period, and was created the first Viscount Runciman of Doxford. His father, Leslie, the second Viscount, was active in public life around shipping and air transport, as well as continuing to run the family's own business. Garry Runciman was therefore the third Viscount. His uncle, Sir Steven Runciman FBA, was a noted historian of the Crusades.

From 1955 to 1958 Garry had been a scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge, achieving a double first in classics and history. This was followed by a Harkness Fellowship at Harvard University. In his entry on Runciman in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Anthony Heath notes that in the United States he met the important sociologist Robert K. Merton, and became deeply interested in that discipline.² From 1959 to 1963 he returned to Trinity as a research fellow and began writing on sociology, while also continuing his work on classical philosophy and political theory. In 1967 he was appointed to a readership in sociology at the then new University of Sussex. He returned to a research fellowship at Trinity from 1971 onwards. These academic appointments had to be part-time because of his duties in the family shipping business, of which he was chairman from 1976 to 1990. Elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1975, he served as its President 2001–05.

¹Runciman (1995).

²Heath (2024).

Achievements of a ‘reluctant theorist’

Runciman’s major academic achievement was his three-volume *A Treatise on Social Theory*,³ which brought together knowledge from his original base in classics and history with an essentially sociological approach. He firmly believed that theory should not be an independent sub-discipline, but should always grow out of and alongside empirical work. But he was by no means an anti-theoretical empiricist; he insisted that the facts and evidence available from historiography needed to be understood through a theoretical lens. Hence his idea of being a ‘reluctant’ theorist, not wanting to elevate theory to a status of its own. The phrase *Confessions of a Reluctant Theorist* was the title he gave to a collection of his essays published in 1989.⁴ He there expounded the idea that, if it were to be comprehensible to readers, the order of presentation of a major historical and empirical study had to start by laying down the theoretical framework through which the empirical material could be approached. Therefore, *A Treatise on Social Theory* became the title of the trilogy, and the first volume (published in 1983) was entitled *The Methodology of Social Theory*.⁵ The subsequent volumes were increasingly empirical in character.

The Methodology distinguished among four levels of social science methodology: reportage, description, explanation and evaluation. He then set out the criteria according to which works in these different categories needed to be assessed. His own main concern was with explanation, which brought within a theoretical frame the more straightforwardly factual contributions of reportage and description. However, he considered these two empirical activities as highly important, as they should provide a shared basis of evidence on which scholars might develop rival explanations and evaluations. Evaluation entailed the introduction of value judgements, with which he was not principally concerned.

Volume II of the *Treatise – Substantive Social Theory* – pursued this idea in relation to three broad themes: social status and class relations; social structures and the distribution of power; and social developments in the way of change and reform.⁶ It organised the history of a wide range of human societies according to an evolutionary scheme similar to the idea of natural selection, whereby more successful institutions, memes and practices survived, while others fell by the wayside. (He was here using ‘meme’ in the sense derived from evolutionary theory, and not the more recent meaning in social media.) The fundamental motor of the process was the way in which the incumbents of

³Runciman (1983–97).

⁴Runciman (1989a).

⁵Runciman (1983a).

⁶Runciman (1989b).

certain social roles competed for access to and control over ‘the means of production, persuasion and coercion’ – that is, the worlds of the economy, ideology and politics.

The final volume, *Applied Social Theory* (1997), completed the 14-year project by applying the approach to a more time- and place-limited subject than Volume II: the development of different components of English society through its capitalist economy, liberal ideology and increasingly democratic form of coercion (or politics).⁷ Selective pressures were seen as favouring some developments in each of these fields over others in an increasingly complex environment.

The ground had been laid for this *magnum opus* in an accumulation of earlier publications. In *Plato’s Later Epistemology*, written as early as 1962, Runciman explored Plato’s discussions of different forms of knowledge and the problem of establishing what is meant by truth value – a predecessor of his own idea of different levels of social scientific methodology.⁸ Transitions from his original intellectual bases towards a more empirically rooted sociology were worked out in *Social Science and Political Theory* (1963 and 1969), which related some classical themes in political theory to various then contemporary electoral and other issues.⁹ His particular position that, while sociology offered major insights into questions long considered in other disciplines, it should not be considered autonomous from, for example, philosophy or history, but draw on and exist alongside them, was developed in the eponymous introductory essay to *Sociology in Its Place and Other Essays* (1970).¹⁰

Quentin Skinner FBA, one of Runciman’s close colleagues at Cambridge, said that he had been principally concerned with the problem of the possibility of a value-free social science that could parallel the methods of the natural sciences in discovering general laws of social behaviour.¹¹ This had been an issue that had preoccupied Max Weber, one of the late 19th-century founding fathers of sociology, and Runciman had first developed his own response, that would feature in *Methodology*, in his book on Weber, published in 1972.¹² He argued that there was no distinctive problem about explanation in the social sciences. There was, however, a problem about reportage and description – that is, about what could be agreed, in advance of explanation, about what was going on in a given society. He argued that far more attention needed to be paid to reporting and describing social experiences that were at once authentic and at the same time representative of the society concerned.

⁷Runciman (1997).

⁸Runciman (1962).

⁹Runciman (1963).

¹⁰Runciman (1970).

¹¹Quentin Skinner, ‘A Tribute to Garry Runciman’, British Academy event to commemorate the life of Garry Runciman, 28 April 2022.

¹²Runciman (1972).

If one adds the preoccupations revealed in the four volumes of essays on *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, edited jointly with his Cambridge colleagues Peter Laslett FBA and later Quentin Skinner in 1962, 1967 and 1972, one can see a lengthy, deeply thought through preparation for tackling the major task of the *Treatise*.¹³ Similarly, Heath¹⁴ reminds us that he continued to work on the themes of the *Treatise* over subsequent decades in a number of individual papers: ‘Origins of States: The Case of Archaic Greece’;¹⁵ ‘Capitalism without Classes: The Case of Classical Rome’;¹⁶ and ‘Accelerating Social Mobility: The Case of Anglo-Saxon England’.¹⁷

The potentially most contentious of his ideas – though only for those who did not look more than superficially at what he was saying – was his embrace of what he called neo-Darwinism. This was first developed explicitly in *The Social Animal*,¹⁸ a book he wrote, interestingly, as an ‘introduction’ to sociology, demonstrating his interest in introducing new people to the discipline as well as writing highly advanced studies. The idea of evolutionary processes in social change had been clearly signalled 20 years earlier in Volume II of the *Treatise*, but Skinner¹⁹ says that neo-Darwinism ‘quite suddenly emerged’. There was therefore a distinction between the general idea of evolution and the explicit addition of the ‘neo-Darwinian’ tag on which Runciman was now insisting.

Among contemporary social scientists this term is likely to evoke 19th-century ideas of racial superiority and the evolution of biologically superior out of inferior species. This is not what Runciman meant at all. His idea of ‘selection’ resembled natural selection only by analogy. What he had in mind was the way certain social and cultural forms developed, probably at first randomly, and became successful in assisting one or other of the three forms of control. Such forms then stood a good chance of successful survival. If this process was cumulative, it might lead to some gradual improvement in how human society was organised, though not with the grand epoch-making historical inevitability of late 19th-century thought, especially that of Karl Marx. The forms concerned might be large-scale institutions such as parliaments, or they might be far smaller memes that affected how people related to one another.

This theme was developed more fully and at a more advanced level in *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*,²⁰ which became his major statement of the theory and its application. Just as the third volume of the *Treatise* had been an application of the ideas

¹³ Laslett *et al.* (1962–72).

¹⁴ Heath (2024).

¹⁵ Runciman (1982).

¹⁶ Runciman (1983b).

¹⁷ Runciman (1984).

¹⁸ Runciman (1998).

¹⁹ Quentin Skinner, ‘A Tribute to Garry Runciman’.

²⁰ Runciman (2009).

of the preceding two to the history of England, so the third volume of this extended neo-Darwinian study similarly traced the evolution of economic, ideological and political memes in the modern history of England: *Very Different but Much the Same: The Evolution of English Society since 1714*,²¹ his last book.²² It imagines Daniel Defoe, author of a three-volume tour of the whole of Britain in the early 18th century,²³ returning to late 20th-century England. Runciman wonders what similarities and differences Defoe would perceive. Technological and engineering differences there would have been in abundance; but he believes that many of the memes, large and small, that had been established by the early 18th century would have met the conditions of social and cultural selection and, sometimes with major mutations, would have been recognisable to Defoe. It was important to Runciman that persistence should not be taken for granted, but needed explanation as much as did change.

He perhaps never solved the problem of avoiding judgements of *post hoc, propter hoc* in assessing institutional survival. If an institution disappears, we can declare that it must have ceased to serve an evolutionary purpose; but can we predict that in advance? Nevertheless, the basic idea of institutional survival is fascinating, especially when it can be used for a whole range of institutions from grandly formal structures to the minutiae of human interaction. One can view institutions as patterns of human behaviour that are sustained, formally perhaps but most interestingly informally, because they serve various interests. This then enables us to see societies as comprising masses of different behavioural codes, not necessarily mutually coherent or supportive at all, with some destined to endure for only short periods, while others might last generations. When we find an enduring pattern, Runciman's approach then asks us to try to discover what economic, ideological and/or political interests, and which associated groups, it serves. We are also encouraged to make this inquiry fully scientific and objective, and not an exercise in prejudice confirmation.

In collaboration with social scientists from a number of disciplines, Runciman supported a research programme through the British Academy into 'the archaeology of the social brain'. This is discussed further below in conjunction with his other work with the Academy.

²¹ Runciman (2015).

²² Humour was creeping into the titles of his later books, in particular *Great Books, Bad Arguments*, explaining why Plato, Hobbes and Marx were wrong in their major works (Runciman 2010).

²³ Defoe (1724–6).

Relative deprivation and social justice

The *Treatise*, its predecessors and successors in the search for an understanding of the erratic movement of history across centuries and civilisations, and the attempt to spell out the meaning and significance of neo-Darwinism, remain Garry Runciman's monumental life achievements. However, he is probably best known among empirical British sociologists for a single research monograph, written early in his career: *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*.²⁴ This was based on an extensive social survey of attitudes and beliefs among ordinary British working people. That kind of empirical study, using detailed, content-rich interview material as well as quantitative data, is relatively commonplace today – though methodological divisions will often separate into hostile rival camps those who believe in in-depth explorations and those who seek readily quantifiable data. In the mid-1960s it was, however, rare in British sociology. He acknowledged considerable assistance from Michael Young and Peter Willmott, whose Institute of Community Studies (located in the poor East End of London) had done so much to pioneer the application of anthropological research methods to contemporary British working class life in the 1950s and 1960s. But for help with statistical data analysis, he had to travel to the US.

This original application of social science research methods was nevertheless accompanied by the then more familiar detailed historical analysis and an exploration in moral philosophy. The combination of all three, which was to become the hallmark of Runciman's methodology, was already strongly present here. He might have carried out a project of this kind partly to demonstrate what distinctly sociological research methods could achieve, and his own ability to do work of that kind. But the highly original substantive content of the study was justification enough for doing it. What interested him was the disjuncture between many citizens' perception of social injustice and the objective reality of the situation of Britain in the early 1960s. He expressed his most salient, and subsequently most famous, findings towards the end:

Most people's lives are governed more by the resentment of narrow inequalities, the cultivation of modest ambitions and the preservation of small differentials than by attitudes to public policy or the social structure as such.²⁵

Despite the diversity of his research methods within this book, he maintained a complete coherence of theoretically driven themes, just as he would later do in the *Treatise* and *The Evolution of English Society*. His guiding concepts here, as in much of

²⁴Runciman (1966).

²⁵Runciman (1966: 285).

his later work, were the Weberian ones of class, status and power.²⁶ Similarities and differences among them in people's experience of relative deprivation across the years 1918 to 1962 were explored with subtlety, yielding many detailed insights in addition to the main one quoted above. The juxtaposition of feelings of relative deprivation with criteria of social justice enabled Runciman to account for many paradoxes in British social history, where feelings of relative deprivation did not seem to correspond to the facts of the case. One element of this was the way in which popular perspectives have broadened and narrowed with historical events. For example, he differentiated between 'egoistic' and 'fraternalistic' relative deprivation. In the former, the subject is concerned with his or her personal situation; in the latter, one feels deprived on the basis of a wider social identity. The relative prominence of these two would vary with the constraints and opportunities presented by various historical moments. This difference of course has considerable political implications.

The book ends with a lengthy disquisition in search of a rational basis on which the idea of social justice and a critique of inequality could be used to assess whether subjective feelings of relative deprivation could be regarded as accurate or as a kind of false consciousness. This was an early statement of his later idea of seeking to use reportage and description as factual bases for social science that could be shared among scholars presenting different explanations and evaluations. Runciman here also reveals himself as an early discoverer – at least in the UK – of the sociological implications of John Rawls's thesis on distributive justice and the role of 'the veil of ignorance'.²⁷ He fully extracted the radical implications of Rawls's concepts for mid-20th-century Britain.

In the use of Rawls and elsewhere, *Relative Deprivation* shows the influence of the developments in game theory that had been taking place since the 1950s. It seemed to satisfy his need to place sociology on an objective, scientific basis at a time when, as now, many practitioners of the discipline seemed vulnerable to taking a more ideological approach. One of his achievements here was to pull the application of game theory to

²⁶ 'Class, Status and Power' was how the first American translators of Max Weber's work into English interpreted his original German of *Klasse, Stand und Partei*. Strictly speaking, '*Stand*' refers to the post-feudal concept of 'estates', not 'status' as used in modern societies. All three components should be seen as constituting power, especially if *Stand* is correctly translated. *Partei* (party, wrongly translated as 'power'), then refers specifically to the power embedded in political organisations, such as parties and trade unions. In practice, Runciman followed Weber's original meaning, concentrating his discussions of the third term to organised political action. For Weber, the three concepts initially represented the different power bases of opposed social groups: *Klasse*, the power of capital; *Stand*, the power of landed aristocracy; and *Partei*, the power of the organised working class. Once derived, the terms became potential elements of general theory construction, and could be applied to other contexts. Runciman also followed Weber in taking concepts from broad historical processes but then finding micro-level uses of memes derived from them.

²⁷ Rawls (1971).

social issues away from the individualism that predominated among its largely US-based practitioners. One can see this in his drawing attention to ‘fraternalistic’ as well as individualistic forms of relative deprivation. It is also present in an early article he published in 1965 with his Trinity, Cambridge colleague, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen FBA, on ‘Games, Justice and the General Will’.²⁸ This tried to show how ideas of ‘general will’ and ‘common good’ could be derived from non-zero-sum non-co-operative games of the prisoner’s dilemma kind.

Work with the British Academy, and its Presidency

Elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1975, Runciman took a serious interest in its work, particularly in its sociology section, once that was established. He saw the Academy as a means of improving and celebrating the quality of British social science. He therefore insisted on high standards among candidates for the Fellowship, always asking what a particular individual’s original contribution to the progress of knowledge had been.²⁹ He was therefore less interested in extensions of the Academy’s work beyond its prime role of the pursuit of excellence, though he was a highly active fellow, both organising many meetings and projects and simply attending those organised by others.

He was elected President of the Academy from 2001 to 2005. In that capacity he oversaw its historic centenary celebrations in 2002, and presided over a Strategic Review of the Academy’s activities, which led to its having for the first time a Mission Statement and set of Strategic Objectives.

He also promoted the launch of a ground-breaking interdisciplinary research project: *From Lucy to Language: Archaeology of the Social Brain*. This brought together psychologists, archaeologists and others to chart the evolution of human cognition and social lives over millennia. It clearly reflected both his interest in the *social* aspects of evolution, and his belief in placing the social sciences on a scientific basis. It was anticipated in 1995 by a set of papers edited by him and some colleagues, and organised jointly with the Royal Society, on the evolution of social behaviour patterns.³⁰ He was very impressed by the progress being made by evolutionary biologists, especially one of his co-editors of that volume, John Maynard Smith, and wanted sociology to be able to make similarly scientific progress with its own meaning of evolution.³¹ The ‘From Lucy

²⁸ Runciman & Sen (1965).

²⁹ Runciman served influentially as Chairman of the British Academy’s Fellowship Standing Committee (a committee playing an important role in elections to the Fellowship) from 1993 to 2006.

³⁰ Runciman, Maynard Smith & Dunbar (1996).

³¹ Runciman was involved in two other collective British Academy volumes discussing similar themes

to Language' project, which the Academy funded until 2010, produced a large number of significant research papers.

As President, he also contributed to and edited an important Academy report examining the events, controversies and legal issues surrounding the UK's invasion of Iraq in 2003.³² The report explores the inner workings of the Blair government at the time and the deeper themes of trust between government, the governed and the news media. This project remains an important resource for anyone seeking to understand those times or, more generally, what goes on in the corridors of power.

Contributions to the common good

The fact that Runciman sought a scientific, value-free sociology did not mean that he was unconcerned with public life. One can argue that the positions he took in works such as *Relative Deprivation* were not so much about seeking complete freedom from adopting value positions as ensuring that the latter were rooted in rational argument and logic. Also, his intellectual concern for finding rational definitions of the common good was accompanied by considerable personal involvement in charitable and public activities.

The former were concentrated mainly through one of his family's trusts, the Northmoor Trust (1968–2019), which he ran with his wife Ruth and a small number of other trustees from outside the family. Ruth Runciman has been highly active in public life herself, in particular being one of the founders in 1981 of the Prison Reform Trust (PRT), chair of the Mental Health Act Commission, and for many years chair of the Central and North West London National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust, and active in the Citizens' Advice Bureau. Through the Northmoor Trust they together helped a number of causes, concentrating deliberately on those that were relatively unpopular or unfashionable, and therefore finding it difficult to secure funding from established sources. Some of these funding decisions derived from Ruth's experiences with prisons and prisoners' lives through the PRT, such as groups helping prisoners with drug addiction or AIDS. Other recipients of the Trust's funds included charities tackling poverty and community disadvantage or giving advice on benefits and debt, as well as those organising maternity help for Roma and Traveller people, working on mental health issues or helping refugees.

For 25 years Garry was also treasurer of the Child Poverty Action Group. In this capacity, despite the clear potential for him to make a considerable contribution to policy debates, he scrupulously focused on financial issues only. As with his Northmoor Trust

(Runciman 2001a; 2001b).

³²Runciman (2004).

role, as a wealthy man he considered that he had an obligation to give something back to society, but did this in a quiet, unostentatious way.

Royal Commission on Criminal Justice

In 1991 he was invited by the then government to chair a Royal Commission on Criminal Justice. Although all its members contributed to the report (published in 1993),³³ much of it bears the hallmarks of its chair's humanistic rationalism, not to mention Ruth's deep knowledge of some of the darker sides of the system. Runciman was concerned to consult first-hand with staff at all levels, from police courts to prisons, and including all judicial procedures.³⁴ Much of the final report was concerned to remedy inadequacies and inefficiencies in how the criminal justice system operated at all levels, but its most substantive and original proposal was for the establishment of a Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) to investigate cases of possible miscarriages of justice. The Runciman commission had been appointed after some major cases of miscarriage, and this proposal was quickly implemented. The review commission has become an important means for remedying judicial errors and the disturbing issue of false convictions. Ruth then helped to establish the Miscarriages of Justice Support Service, through the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, to give advice and support to persons appealing to the CCRC.

Some reformers hoping for stronger protections of the rights of defendants were inclined to be disappointed that the report did not go further, but it was also the case that some recommendations that the Runciman Commission did make and that would have helped defendants were considered by government to be too radical. One of these was a proposal that in certain cases defendants from ethnic minorities should have a right to have a number of jurors from ethnic minority communities. The report also pleaded unsuccessfully for assessments of police performance to be based on assessments of quality, not on targets for arrests and convictions.

Some other proposals that were not implemented bore the marks of the chair's social scientific mind: that professionals concerned with the criminal justice system should have compulsory training in forensic science; and that there should be research into how juries tended to operate. The latter offended some deep-rooted beliefs in the sanctity of juries, as did a proposal that the right to a jury trial might be limited in some cases. A government returned to this latter idea 33 years later.

³³ Royal Commission on Criminal Justice (1993).

³⁴ Dame Anne Rafferty, contribution to British Academy event to commemorate the life of Garry Runciman, 28 April 2022.

Securities and Investment Board

In 1986, at the time of the major deregulation of the British financial sector, usually known as the ‘Big Bang’, the government replaced existing regulatory agencies with a Securities and Investment Board. Runciman was appointed one of its first members, eventually becoming deputy chairman. He remained in this role until the board was replaced by the Financial Services Authority in 1990. He was a member of this successor body until he retired in 1998.

Owner of a shipping line

His role in financial services regulation is a reminder of Runciman’s career as a successful businessman. His great-grandfather had founded a shipping line in north-east England in 1889, which became a group of companies, and after various changes of name and structure remained in the family until the group was finally sold in 1990. Garry Runciman served as chair of the company from 1976 to 1990, overseeing its eventual sale. From 1986 to 1987 he was chair of the General Council of British Shipping. Work for the firm occupied four days a week, which means that it was his primary activity. His duties at Cambridge and academic work could occupy only a small part of his time during many of his intellectually creative years. He once wrote: ‘I earn my living as chairman of a public limited company rather than as an academic.’³⁵

In the same article he described his business in the following terms:

The company is a long-established, originally family-controlled, shipping-based mini-conglomerate which diversified some time ago into insurance and security engineering. In the late Seventies and early Eighties, when the shipping industry was being savaged by a horrendous global recession which sent many larger as well as smaller shipowners to the wall, the name of the game was survival; and diversification into engineering was little or no help at a time when UK-based low-tech manufacturing was itself grappling with a painful conjunction of domestic overcapacity, inflated costs and shrinking demand. But we survived all right ...³⁶

His working life – and arguably indeed his life in general – seems to have been compartmentalised, with little overlap between the different spheres. (He once commented to a sociologist who was writing a book on economic sociology and was consulting him about his business experience, that he was the only sociologist ever to have shown an interest in his business life.) However, he did write two articles in the *London Review of*

³⁵Runciman (1988).

³⁶Ibid.

Books about his experiences of: a failed hostile takeover bid in 1988, from which the above quotations have been taken;³⁷ and a successful one two years later.³⁸ Both articles are extremely amusing, but they also demonstrate the Runciman approach to knowledge and rational argument, bemused at the apparently small role of those virtues in the world of high finance, and remaining balanced in his assessment of the overall process:

I suppose I should have known already that in Moneyspeak ‘ready to help’ means ‘willing to exploit’, ‘a commercial view’ means ‘short-term greed’, ‘an agreed deal’ means ‘a surrender’ and the epithet ‘gentlemanly’ is a term of unmitigated contempt. But I didn’t.

Following the successful bid for the family firm from the Swedish line Avena, Runciman was a year later appointed chair of another, larger, British shipping firm, Andrew Weir & Co Ltd, serving until 2005.

An assessment

From one perspective, Garry Runciman was a successful businessman who surprisingly spent some of his time contributing to academic sociology. But from another he was a major figure in British sociology who astonishingly spent most of his working life successfully running shipping lines. As Quentin Skinner commented:

... This combination of very high intellectual gifts with a steely resolve is I suppose what makes for success in many walks of life, and in Garry’s case it made him a great scholar and social scientist. But it was important to him, I think, that he was never a professional academic. It is true that he had many academic friends, and he certainly enjoyed gossiping about academic life. But in several of his prefaces he expresses the hope that his findings may be of interest precisely because they are not those of someone influenced by working in Universities.³⁹

He might not have been an academic, but he was certainly a major intellectual figure: an intellectual businessman with a highly developed social conscience.

Within academic disciplines, he identified himself decisively as a sociologist, and was indeed one of the founding figures in British sociology’s major flourishing in the 1960s and 1970s. He continued to identify as such into the 1980s and beyond, when the subject lost much of its earlier popularity. But he was not a sociological purist, and combined its insights and methods with those of classical studies, history and political and moral philosophy. In his Introduction to a volume on British sociology edited by himself

³⁷Runciman (1988).

³⁸Runciman (1990).

³⁹Quentin Skinner, ‘A Tribute to Garry Runciman’.

and A.H. Halsey FBA in 2005,⁴⁰ he celebrated the diversity of the subject, including those approaches for which he personally had little sympathy: for example, empiricists versus those taking a literary approach; and social reductionists versus social biologists. On the other hand, he was highly critical of sociologists who smuggled in ‘attitudes’ behind a veneer of objective science. He thus combined a highly independent mind and confidence in his own intellectual contribution with recognition of the desirability of a diversity of approaches to study.

He drew inspiration from two intellectual environments in which he had spent time. At Cambridge he had such colleagues as Peter Laslett, Quentin Skinner and Amartya Sen. In the US he came to know Robert Merton and others of the great mid-century generation of American sociologists, who were also bringing Max Weber and other earlier authors to an English-language public. His work was thus able to acquire a rare depth and richness, bringing together separate fields of study in sometimes surprising ways – the entrepreneurial form taken by much innovation in academic as well as business activity.

His *Treatise* has perhaps not received the attention it deserves from contemporary sociology, a fate it has shared with several other attempts by modern sociologists to address large-scale historical themes. The British discipline has tended to flourish at a smaller scale of topics and analysis. Although sociology does not have the same clarity of a distinction between micro and macro that economics possesses, the difference is there. Runciman is among the few who have kept the flame of a macro-sociology linked to historiography alive. But he could also work at the micro level. Although *Relative Deprivation* draws on major themes of political and social history, its use of survey techniques to explore individuals’ social perceptions lies closer to the concerns of contemporary British sociology. It retains an important place and relevance after six decades.

Some found him personally austere and stern in his judgements. This was the result of his commitment to high intellectual standards both for himself and for others who sought academic success. But to those who knew him at a more personal level he was warm and supportive, and also had a fine and self-deprecatory sense of humour, as his articles on shipping takeovers in the *London Review of Books* clearly demonstrated. His sometimes reserved manner struck some as intimidating, but this was the last thing he wanted. If he was reserved it was precisely because he wanted to avoid intimidating anyone.

Garry Runciman was a true child of the Enlightenment; he was committed to scientific rationality, both as a philosophical tradition and in such modern methodologies as game theory. That same commitment sustained his complete independence of mind. Although very conscious of where he stood in the great traditions of western thought, he also beat

⁴⁰Halsey & Runciman (2005).

his own path, following such tracks as neo-Darwinian evolutionism even though he knew this would be widely misunderstood. He was also a Renaissance man in the range of his activities, and not just across academic disciplines. As Anthony Heath FBA summarised him in his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: ‘businessman, sociologist, and public servant’.⁴¹

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