CULTURAL EVOLUTIONISM

Theory in Practice

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CULTURAL EVOLUTIONISM

Preface

This book argues for a theory of cultural evolution. It is not simply theoretical grand scheming about definitions, programs, and methods—although there is necessarily some discussion of these—but more an attempt to describe and discuss the theory and method as applied to a variety of empirical problems that range from general to particular, from ancient to modern, including some methodological problems that appear to be peculiar to the evolutionary approach. The aim of this attempt at such variety is threefold: (1) to discuss evolutionism in different contexts so that some current misunderstandings may be dissipated; (2) to justify cultural evolutionism by the test of its fruitfulness in helping solve specific empirical problems; and (3) to stimulate discussion, rebuttals, and new applications of the theory that may refine or otherwise alter it and make it more useful.

Evolutionary theory has been typically criticized as too deductive, too general, and too theoretical, cavalier toward the actualities of history and ethnographical fact, and so on. It is difficult to see why these characteristics have to be necessarily true of *evolutionism*, although they may be applicable to an individual evolutionist—a Spencer or a Briffault. An important aspect of the present book is its emphasis on the need for balanced reciprocity between theory and fact, and especially the ways in which ethnological interpretation can influence theory as much or more than theory influences interpretation.

The history of thought about cultural evolution is a confusingly com-

plicated one, and some of the misrepresentations of evolutionism seem incredible. Several of the chapters in the present work will include relevant slices of that history. But it should be understood now that this is not simply an attempt to reestablish 19th century evolutionists and to demolish their Boasian and functionalist critics. Boas and his students established one of the most significant intellectual advances in social science in distinguishing in the course of history (and in evolution, it could be said) the separate roles of race, language, and culture. The resulting modern concept of culture is of utmost importance to evolutionism, and it owes more to Boas than to anyone else. And as for functionalism, it will become evident that modern evolutionism can embrace structural-functionalist conceptions as well as it does historicism. In fact, evolutionism should logically become the most eclectic of any of the various theoretical perspectives in modern social science.

Now, as a final apparent paradox, it should be understood that we must disagree with some important 18th and 19th century evolutionist assumptions. We need today not only to have the more sophisticated understanding of culture (via Boas) and of functionalism, but also to reject and remake some of the basic earlier beliefs about the causes, directions, and significances of evolutionary events. The first three chapters are especially dedicated to this discussion.

Since each chapter was designed to stand alone, being devoted to a separate and specific topic, there is necessarily repetition for the reader who goes straight through the book. On the other hand, inasmuch as some of the chapters were written and published over widely separated points in time, they will seem to be stylistically distinct, with different "tones of voice." This may be an advantage, but mostly for the reader who skips around, or for the student whose assignments are intermittant.

The original impetus for this book was the several essays originally published elsewhere. They have been varyingly revised as indicated by the overall plan. Five new essays were written in order to introduce wider variety. These are the following chapters: 1. "Evolution, Involution, and Revolution"; 2. "The Prime-Mover of Cultural Evolution"; 4. "Revolution Unprecedented"; 5. "History and Revolutionary Theory"; and 10. "Our Contemporary Ancestors." (Chapters 2 and 10 were recently published elsewhere in somewhat different form, but they were originally written for this book.)

In this book I am addressing an audience of anthropology majors and graduate students, without any intellectual concessions, but also, I hope, without any academic facetiousness or professional jargon.

E. R. S.

Author's Note

Many people helped in the original preparation of most of these chapters and were thanked in the first publication of the articles. To mention them all again would make too long a list. I have tried to use citations judiciously in the text to point up specific intellectual debts. There are some people who have been left out, however, because of the nature of the dependence: which is my tendency to rely as much on encouragement as on criticism. I have always tried out ideas on people hoping for favorable responses, and for these "affects" I have been for over half my life indebted to my wife, many colleagues, and hundreds of students. I thank them all in equal amounts—that is, with all my heart.

Contents

PART ONE

Cultural Evolution Defined and Discussed as Intellectual History

Chapter 1, "Evolution, Involution, and Revolution" is a very general definitional attempt to get our concepts straight before attempting evolutionary interpretations of various anthropological problems. It is an attempt, however, rather different from so many definitions; it attends closely to world-historical processes that seem to be actually occurring. *Evolution*—sequential, directional advance in terms of some measurable criteria of progress—is also normally a form of adjustment to nature, to antecedent cultural traits and institutions, and to adjacent societies so that frequently progress consists of increasing complication, or *involution.* And, of course, the process of evolution by involution may come to the point of stabilization just because of the complicated and specialized adjustments. The way to evolutionary progress, again, frequently seems to be violent disruptive reactions against the involuted structure, *revolution.*

Chapter 2, "The Prime-Mover of Cultural Evolution" is a very general discussion of the history of competing evolutionary theories about the determinants of evolution. The purpose of the discussion is twofold: to introduce the reader succinctly to the important theorists in the most significant argumentative context, and to argue against all mono-causal theories. Basically, it is an attempt to free evolutionary theory from dogma so that it can be modified by objective judgment on actual events.

1

Evolution, Involution, and Revolution

The development of the 18th century evolutionary perspective must have been closely related to the actual dynamics of Europe's rapid modernization. This movement had two aspects: one was the rise of long-range commerce, urban centers, and national states with the attendant disruption of the ancient, static, feudal-monarchical order; the other combined the activities of explorers, missionaries, traders, and colonizers—who opened nearly the entire world to European dominance.

The actual experience with radical social and political change suggested the fundamentals of the evolutionary view: sequential, systemic changes. This view gradually came to have great political as well as philosophical significance as it opposed the reactionary perspective of stasis: that is, of fixed, God-given, social-economic classes.

The idea that evolution involves sequences of related forms, also basically opposed it to kinds of changes that are chaotic or cataclysmic. This is to say that evolutionary change is orderly, which means that it can be analyzed scientifically in terms of cause-and-effect; and further, that characteristics of any given phenomenon cannot be fully understood, or explained, without knowing something about its ancestry—the antecedent sequence of related forms from which it "unfolded."

The other stimulus to the evolutionary perspective was simply the astonishing diversity of races and cultures revealed to the Europeans as

they ranged the world. How to explain this diversity? Many of the recently discovered ethnic groups seemed to have smaller and simpler societies—they seemed more "primitive" in various ways. If the idea of sequential change is added to any version of this notion about some kind of directional progress from primitive to modern societies, then we have the basis for the later, more sophisticated evolutionary schemes.

Directionality refers to the idea that societies can be arranged along a linear scale in terms of some kind of general criterion of advancement or progress. This scale was often stated explicitly in terms of "progress toward civilization," and also implicitly by the use of such descriptive epithets as "primitive" and "advanced," "simple" and "complex," "low" and "high," and in such labels as "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilization."

19TH CENTURY EVOLUTIONISM

In the latter half of the 19th century, a more empirical and less ethnocentric evolutionary perspective appeared. Morgan in the U.S.A. and Tylor in England were the most influential evolutionists in anthropology; Saint-Simon, Comte, and Durkheim in France and Spencer in England were pioneers in sociology; in Germany (and later in exile) Marx and Engels were formulating an evolutionary theory of political economy. There were many others, of course, but these famous figures will serve to illustrate the major developments and disagreements within the growing evolutionary sciences.

The most significant differences among them can be reduced to three major facets of the evolutionary problem. 1. *What* is it that is evolving: stages of culture in general? separate institutions? a particular social system? 2. *How* does it evolve: by inevitable progress? improved human reason? survival of the fittest? dialectical struggle? 3. *Where* is the major evolutionary impulse: in technological developments? increased specialization of labor? political inventions? ideology? a cosmic immanence?

1. *What* Is Evolving?

E. B. Tylor is famous in anthropological history for the definition of culture with which he began his greatest work, *Primitive Culture* (1871). As the historian George Stocking (1968:Ch. 9) points out, however, Tylor's conception of culture and modern American conceptions are quite different. Tylor was concerned with general stages of advancement in culture, and also with the evolution of culture "along its many lines"—that is, sequences of improvements of weapons, forms of family, ideology, or religion. Nowhere does he evince interest in how the culture of a particular society

works as a *system.* Named ethnic groups served merely as illustrations of grand cultural stages of development.

Morgan did not use the word culture, but his use of the terms "society" and "ethnical periods" were essentially similar to Tylor's "stages." A much-cited passage of Morgan's will illustrate his conception and some of the difficulties it causes (1964:6–7):

> Since mankind were one in origin, their career has been essentially one, running in different but uniform channels upon all continents, and very similarly in all the tribes and nations of mankind down to the same status of advancement. It follows that the history and experience of the American Indian tribes, represent, more or less nearly, the history and experience of our own remote ancestors when in corresponding conditions.

This sounds "unilineal" to modern ethnologists, whose concern has been mostly with descriptive analysis of the structure and functioning of particular societies. But if Morgan's statement is read in context, it becomes apparent that he meant nothing more than that a general stage of hunting-gathering had preceded a stage of horticulture in both Europe and America and that both underlay European civilization. This seems so sensible, if commonplace, that no comment seems necessary, but in Morgan's day it was worth stating because theories of degeneration and catastrophy were still commonly opposed to evolutionism.

The sociologists, especially those under the influence of Spencer and later, Durkheim, accepted the organismic model for society. Evolution is a development of this societal whole into more parts and greater differentiation of these parts. The lack of a concept of "culture," as something distinct from "society," was an imposing intellectual handicap. Durkheim (1938) made complicated attempts to solve the problem, but he seems to have caused more confusion than clarity, even among his own students.

The Marxists were more inspired by anthropology than by sociology. Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,* in fact, borrowed heavily from Morgan's *Ancient Society.* As in Morgan's thought, the concept of culture was absent. It could have been appropriately used, especially because technological and economic factors were not seen by Engels as merely subserviently integrative in their function in society but as more of an initiating "prime-mover" than the sociologists believed, and this suggested functional and cause-effect kinds of relations among institutions (which are cultural) rather than among social groups alone.

2. *How* Does Culture Evolve?

The 18th century evolutionists had thought of the improvement of the human condition as a result of the progressive evolution of thought. There

was a residue of this attitude in the 19th century as evidenced by such expressions as Morgan's "Growth of the Idea of Government" and Tylor's tendency to view progress in terms of conscious and rationalistic improvements.

How the evolutionary process worked was not otherwise described. In Tylor's view, new elements in culture sometimes tend to replace older ones if they are better, but beyond that one has the impression that evolution was taken as a "given," that immanent forces had moved mankind ever upward, however unevenly.

On the other hand, some of the most prominent of the 19th century sociologists explicitly proposed a cause for the evolutionary process. This was the theory of "social Darwinism": Out of conflict among societies superior ones replace the inferior; within societies, competition among classes, groups, even individuals, results in "survival of the fittest." Walter Bagehot, Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, and Ludwig Gumplowicz were the leading thinkers.

Although Marx and Engels were influenced by Morgan they became more consistently deterministic and materialistic than were the anthropologists and held a much more definite theory of the mechanics of evolution. To them the prime-mover in evolution was basically improvements in technology which in turn produced more goods, changed property relations, economic classes, and the state itself. (The famous "class struggle" is a precipitate out of this, not the cause of overall evolution).[1]

3. *Where* Is the Locus of the Evolutionary Impulse?

Both Morgan and Tylor saw technology, science, material culture generally, as undergoing a progressive, cumulative evolution, independent from religion and "intellectual and moral" progress. Nowhere is it plain, however, that one of these aspects is the prime-mover and the other a dependent variable. Again, it should be remembered that Morgan and Tylor were not talking about the process of systemic change in any particular society, hence the matter of functional priority of one part over another simply did not concern them.

The sociologists also seem to have taken evolution for granted. Even Herbert Spencer, the most consistently mechanistic, saw the evolutionary process as simply a grand cosmic force that generated complexity out of simplicity and heterogeneity out of homogeneity, aided only sometimes by Darwinian conflict-and-survival. Émile Durkheim (1933) posited that the

[1] Marx said in the Author's Preface of *Capital* (1906:13): "Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity toward inevitable results."