

Why did evolutionism become discredited in anthropology by about 1920?

“The inquirer who seeks ... the beginnings of man’s civilisation must deduce general principles by reasoning downwards from the civilised European to the savage, and then descend to still lower levels of human existence”¹ – so wrote Edward Burnett Tylor in 1863. These “potent and beguiling notions”², to use Adam Kuper’s phrase, represented a part of an evolutionist mainstream which flourished in the 1860s and 70s yet which by the 1920s had fallen from grace in favour of diffusionism and, more starkly, functionalism and structuralism. This essays looks at the kind of evolutionism that particularly Spencer, Morgan, Tylor and Frazer espoused. It examines the problems with their renditions of evolutionism and looks at the manner in which theoretical deficiencies were overcome in the theories that replaced them. I then posit other reasons of a political and less theoretical nature for the end of mainstream unilinear evolutionism by around 1920.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was not a typical evolutionist. He proclaimed the virtues of individual competition, postulating that societies pass through stages from infancy through to old age and espousing social Darwinism; but his writings on the

¹ Edward Burnett Tylor, ‘Wild men and beast-children’, *Anthropological Review* 1, pp.21-32

² Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, p.1

organicity of society place him also within the functionalist camp. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-81) envisioned a transition from the “savagery” of hunter gatherer society, through the “barbarism” of agricultural society to the “civilisation” engendered in the state and in urbanisation. Like Spencer and the majority of Victorian evolutionists, the sentiment underlying Morgan’s evolutionism suggested that if we would only empathise enough with the thought processes of these exotic others, the misdirected internal logic of their religion and customs should become comprehensible to us. In Edward Burnett Tylor’s (1832-1917) terms this was possible because of the “psychic unity of mankind”³ – an idea shared implicitly by his contemporaries. Tylor’s notion of “cultural survivals” whereby cultural traits manage outlive their original function and are transmitted nonetheless, has diffusionist qualities, yet Tylor did see culture in qualitative terms equated for him with civilisation.

Following a line of thought from Vico via Comte, James Frazer (1854-1941) defines three stages for society: magic, religion and science. Whilst neither corresponding precisely to Comte’s tripartite grand narrative of theological – metaphysical – positive; nor to Vico’s age of gods, of heroes and of man, Frazer’s elaboration strikingly regards magic and science as similar technologies in their denial of a capricious spiritual agency.

³ Thomas Hyland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology*, p.23

Frazer envisions coterminous interweaving of his three strands in the tapestry of culture over time with the white thread of science eventually winning through. John Lubbock (1834-1913) puts the implicit evolutionist view of religious development most explicitly: atheism is a primordial default stage in which no clear ideas of spirits exist, then fetishism arises, nature-worship or totemism develops, shamanism (where remote and powerful deities are only accessible through the intercession of a shaman) is succeeded by idolatry (in which gods are like men) and finally theism. Tylor built on this unilinear model, hypothesising that as a result of individual reflection on death, dreams, trances and comas, the idea of a ghost-soul – a detachable life essence – was speculated upon and that this metaphor of a spirit became extended, first to inanimate objects, then to plants, animals and a spirit world. It is noted here that McLennan's use of Tylor's term "animism" as religious belief without "high gods" is a misappropriation of the word Tylor originally coined to refer generally to all belief in spiritual beings.

Evolution of social structure was described by Henry Sumner Maine (1822-1888) following analysis of Roman law in *Ancient Law* (1861): "The individual is steadily substituted for the family, as the unit of which civil laws take account"⁴. In 1864 in *La Cité Antique*, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) postulated the

⁴ Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: its connection with the early history of society and its relation to modern ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1861), pp.139-141; cited here from Elman R. Service, *A Century of Controversy: ethnological issues 1860-1960*, p.6

following evolution of social forms based on study of Greco-Roman legal and religious institutions as well as Indo-European etymology: family, gens, phratry, tribe, city. Similarly, Morgan's approach was to see kinship nomenclature as markers for genealogical, biological positions which change very slowly, thus conceiving of kinship terminology as akin to a social fossil record for the social structure of non-modern societies.

The main problem with these evolutionist theories lies in their speculative nature. In the words of E. E. Evans-Pritchard with reference to Tylor's theory of animism, "The theory has the quality of a just-so story like 'how the leopard got his spots'"⁵. The common premise of unilinear evolutionist theory states that all societies go through the same sequence of gradually more complex religious, institutional and cultural forms in the same order. For non-literate societies, tracing a genealogy of such forms and ranking them cannot proceed without considerable speculation and necessarily an ethnocentric bias. Furthermore, where the hypotheses generated are plausible they do not suggest any overall fieldwork methodology which might falsify them. Evidence is lacking – in the words of Thomas Hyland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen on *The Golden Bough*, "It stands alone, a majestic monument to the insecure empirical basis of Victorian

⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.25

Evolutionism”⁶. Compared to this, disputes over the cultural meaning and function of kinship terminology as well as terminological confusion regarding magic / religion and rites / beliefs, make what are perhaps relatively minor contributions to discrediting the evolutionism of the 1860s and 1870s.

However, what could not be dismissed so easily were ethnographic examples which did not fit the general principles of unilinear evolutionism. Examples include the many Australian tribes who, whilst expected by Frazer to display a greater reliance upon magic and less religion by virtue of being simpler cultures, in fact have more animistic and theistic beliefs than expected and conversely possess only a narrow variety of magic on the limited canvass of a non-cultivating, non-iron-working subsistence⁷. To take a different example, amid the complex political systems of Polynesian chiefdoms, would not Spencer have found it difficult to account for the relative underdevelopment of basic pottery.⁸

Diffusionism did not replace evolutionism, for they are not incompatible ideologies, but it did provide a theory more receptive to facts on the ground and with more modest theoretical pretensions. Diffusionists such as Montelius, Elliot Smith, Perry and ultimately Rivers would accept that social change generally leads to progress and

⁶ Eriksen and Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology*, p.26

⁷ Evans-Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.27

⁸ Eriksen and Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology*, p.19

increased “sophistication” but objected to the deterministic hypothesis that societies must pass through certain stages in order to reach others.

However, it was the sociologist Durkheim who radically altered the terms of the evolutionist debate showing little interest in origins, progress, symbols and myths, but instead treating society as a body of institutions and organisations which maintained the social organism’s functional solidarity. Playing to some enduring preoccupations of anthropology – such as how social integration exists and works in stateless societies and understanding the place of ritual and religion in society – it was Durkheim’s vision of “collective representations” as communal conceptions of social life established in religion and reinforced and vivified through ritual that held out the prospect of a grand unifying theory – which might achieve in the social sciences what Darwinism had done for biology or the Indo-European root for linguistics. Mediated and developed by Radcliffe-Brown into a British social anthropology and provisioned with a methodology in Malinowski’s participant observation, it was functionalism that ascended to the throne following evolutionism’s constitutional crisis.

To place this transition within a wider context, whilst it is acknowledged that evolutionism has lived on, reinventing itself as multilinear and universal evolutionism, there were a variety of factors which led to the irreparable discrediting of unilinear

evolutionism in a broader sense. The move of anthropology out of the armchair and into the academy and the increasing amount of ethnographic material – with the appointment in 1896 of Tylor as the first British professor of Anthropology, and the Torres Straits expedition of 1898 being symbolically important milestones in these areas – both fundamentally changed the medium of anthropology. As such the message was also likely to change. Instead of wealthy men of leisure digesting second-hand the accounts of missionaries, botanists, museum collectors, geographers, ship's doctors and gentlemen adventurers; trained ethnologists were systematically reporting back from the field to an academy of tenured academics. The distance from colonial observers and servants of the state was necessarily growing wider and so the growing distance from the structural proclivity to shore up colonial domination must necessarily leave exposed those who, as Evans-Pritchard asides, “wanted an excuse for slavery, and ... those who desired to find a missing link between men and monkeys”⁹. To this must also be added however, the politics of self-perpetuation. With Malinowski at the LSE between 1922 and 1938 and the charismatic Radcliffe-Brown gaining a loyal following and establishing chairs at Cape Town, Sydney, Chicago and Oxford, the institutional base for the long-term influence of functionalism was set.

⁹ Evans-Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.106

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