Neo-evolutionism

Introduction

The unilineal evolutionary schemes fell into disfavor in the 20th century, partly as a result of the constant controversy between evolutionist and diffusuionist theories and partly because of the newly accumulating evidence about the diversity of specific sociocultural systems. All these made it impossible to sustain the largely ‘armchair’ speculations of these early theorists. However, evolutionism was not entirely abandoned, and within both Marxist Anthropology and US cultural evolutionism and cultural ecology there is continuing research and theoretical traditions focusing on sociocultural evolution. In contemporary US evolutionism there are two main currents of thought. They are universal evolutionism of V. Gordon Childe and Leslie White and multilinear evolutionism of Julian Steward. This new twentieth-century perspective on the evolution of society is sometimes referred to as neo-evolutionism.

Objectives

After going through this module you will be able to

- Understand what led to the emergence of the neo-evolutionist scheme
- Analyse critically the major contributions of neo-evolutionists
- Assess the differences between the unilineal evolutionary school and the neo-evolutionary school
- Know the positive points of neo-evolutionism

Major contributions of neo-evolutionists

Universal evolutionists

Leslie White and V Gordon Childe are regarded as universal evolutionists.
**Leslie Alvin White (1900-1975):** Leslie White was a professor at the University of Michigan. After careful study of the nineteenth century evolutionist literature, he concluded that evolutionism was not wrong in theory, only in data and that cultural evolution was just as real and demonstrable as biological evolution. White developed what he called the Basic Law of Cultural Evolution: culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year is increased. White treated societies as entities that evolved in relation to the amount of energy captured and used by each member of society. This energy is directed towards the production of resources for their survival. White assumed that the greater the energy the more highly evolved the sociocultural system. White perceived three cultural subsystems: technological, sociological and ideological. The way society uses its technology to sustain life influences the sociological and ideological systems. Technology and therefore culture evolve as more energy is harnessed. White’s hypothesis of cultural evolution explained the differences in technology and energy production. He hypothesized, for example, that small-scale hunting-and –gathering societies had not developed complex socio-cultural systems because they depended primarily on human energy for production. Their societies were simple, meager and undeveloped due to limited energy source for producing resources. However, sociocultural systems changed dramatically following the agricultural revolution and the capture of energy through the domestication of plants and animals. The technological changes as a result of the agricultural revolution led to the emergence of cities, complex states, powerful political and religious elites, and new ideologies. According to White, the changes in the agricultural societies had been gradual, taking several thousand years, till the Industrial Revolution. But the Industrial Revolution has taken less than five hundred years to produce widespread global transformations. White focused on socio-cultural change on the global level rather than on particular societies. So his approach has been called general evolution. Marshal Shahlins and Service, both students of White , also belong to this group.

**V.Gordon Childe (1892-1957):** V.Gordon Childe was a trained archaeologist and he describes evolution of cultures in his famous book, *Social Evolution* (1951). He described evolution of culture in terms of three major events: i) invention of food production, ii) urbanization and iii) industrialization. He presented an overall view of evolutionary process by analyzing the transitions that took place under the impact of these major events and delineated its common factors. Steward called him as universal evolutionist as he placed general stages of evolution
applicable to mankind as a whole and not of specific or particular cultures. The universal evolutionary scheme of Childe was similar to Leslie White, who also believed in universal sequences of evolution. According to Childe, the multiplicity of cultures revealed by ethnographic and archaeological research is a handicap if the objective is to establish general stages in the evolution of cultures. Therefore in order to discover general laws descriptive of the evolution of all societies one must omit the features peculiar to particular habitats or environments. Childe’s order of evolution differed from those of 19th century evolutionists. Childe’s scheme of evolutionary sequence of culture is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archaeological Period</th>
<th>Cultural development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Palaeolithic period</td>
<td>Savagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Neolithic period</td>
<td>Barbarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Copper age</td>
<td>Higher Barbarism</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Early Bronze age</td>
<td>Civilization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to him, a drastic change in the life pattern of mankind appeared in the stage of civilization, in which an aggressive attitude towards environment developed among mankind. Forest-dwellers or cave-dwellers became house-dwellers. Hunters and gatherers became food producer by adopting agriculture. Writing made them capable of preserving their tradition and mathematics came into being for counting things. The development of cities made them urbanized and technological advancement of smelting copper, bronze, iron, etc made them capable of producing durable utensils and implements. Thus, according to him, at each stage of cultural development, mankind developed their technological skill to exploit natural resources. In the early stage, less advanced technological skill, had made them less aggressive towards environment, but as knowledge went on increasing, they became more and more aggressive. But Childe’s work has certain drawbacks. Firstly, he relied too much on archaeological data to explain cultural evolution. Secondly, he did not take any interest in the civilizational sequence outside Middle East and Europe. Thirdly, he did not take into consideration, the universal existing institutions of matriarchy, sexual promiscuity etc. But despite such criticisms, he was successful in presenting universal scheme of cultural evolution in terms of archaeological sequences.
Multilinear evolutionists:
Multilinear evolution is a methodology based on assumption that significant regularities or parallels occur in cultural change, and it is concerned with the determination of cultural laws. Multilinear evolutionism is proposed by Julian Steward.

Julian Steward (1902–1972): Steward proposed his theory of multilinear evolution in order to reconcile evolutionary theory with the growing evidence of cultural and social diversity available as a result of the advances of modern ethnography and cross-cultural comparative studies. Steward still employed an overall scheme of evolutionary progress through the stages of Band, Chiefdom, and State. Steward, however, combined this general scheme with the study of specific ecological adaptations and their variability. Steward focused on how specific sociocultural systems adapt to environmental conditions. Steward’s cultural-ecology framework divides sociocultural systems into two different spheres: the culture core and secondary features. The culture core consists of those elements most closely related to subsistence: the environment, technology and economic arrangements. The other characteristics, such as social organization, politics and religion, constitute secondary features of society. Steward’s approach is referred to as specific evolution as he investigated the detailed characteristics of different environments. He used this approach to examine the agricultural civilizations of South America, Mesoamerica, the Near East, and the Far East. He found remarkable parallels in the evolution of these different civilizations. They all had irrigation systems, specialized occupations, centralized governments and formalized state religions. Steward emphasized that many of these parallels were the result of similar environmental conditions. Thus, multilinear evolution is based on the assumption that significant regularities or parallels occur in cultural change, and it is concerned with the determination of cultural laws. It is inevitably concerned with historical reconstruction but it does not expect that historical data can be classified into universal stages. It is concerned with local variations and diversified facts that force the frame of reference from particular to general. Therefore, multilinear evolution has no a priori schemes or laws. They simply question whether there are any parallels or similarities between certain cultures. Parallelism is always present in the study of cultures. The methodological approach of multilinear evolution is to establish sequences of parallel development that could be investigated in empirical reality. Steward was also the man who established the field of cultural ecology. Cultural ecology stresses the interrelationship between the natural conditions in the environment (rainfall, temperature, soils) and
technology, social organization and attitudes within a particular sociocultural system. Steward focused how specific sociocultural systems adapt to environmental conditions. Steward’s work also had certain drawbacks. His multilinear evolutionism was not accepted by many anthropologists, including Marvin Harris. White criticized him for confusing history with evolution, as history is concerned with particulars and evolution seeks to generalize. However, his theory was widely accepted by his followers.

**Positive points of neo-evolutionism**

The twentieth –century evolutionists differed from the classical evolutionists in several ways.

- They did not assume a unilinear direction of society through formalized stages such as savagery, barbarism and civilization.
- They were not ethnocentrically biased or racist when it came to understanding why different societies are at various levels of development. The explored environment, technology and energy resources in assessing levels of sociocultural development and abandoned crude terms such as “savagery”.
- Like the nineteenth-century theorists, they did not assume that sociocultural evolution towards complexity is always equated with “progress”. The neo-evolutionists held that some aspects of small-scale societies are, in fact, better than those of complex societies.
- Cultural ecology has become an extremely sophisticated area of research. It has been influenced by developments in biological ecology and theories derived from mathematics, computer modeling, and related sciences.

**Criticisms:**

A number of anthropologists have criticized the neo-evolutionism theory for a variety of reasons. Some critics claim that in emphasizing the role of the environment, cultural ecologists do not take into account historical or political factors.

Again cultural ecologists tend to view every cultural element as the best of all possible solutions to the problems of subsistence and energy requirements due to the emphasis on adaptation.

Though both Steward and White used concepts of evolution, perhaps in light of the kind of explanation commonly sought today, the idea of evolution is less important than their turn to some type of techno-environmental causation where priority is given to the material basis of social life.
Conclusion
In the early 60s, Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, and some other colleagues or followers of Steward and White tried to reconcile the two viewpoints. Drawing analogy with biological evolution, they suggested that evolution has two facets. One is general evolution, a grand movement from simple to complex. The other, specific evolution, change as an adaptive response to an ecological niche. Specific evolution leads to diversity through adaptation. Steward’s multilinear evolution is specific. Cultural relativism is applicable to specific evolution, for each culture can be judged only relative to its ecological niche. On the other hand, general evolution means abandoning relativism. General evolutionary change is absolute and can be evaluated or measured by the amount of energy harnessed.
Sahlins and Service pointed out carefully that in cultural evolution, change is additive, not substitutive, and can be transmitted by diffusion, a much faster means of dissemination than genetic transmission. As adaptation increases so does stability and the greater the specialization, the less potential for evolution. A corollary is that evolutionary potential is greater in less adapted and less specialized societies. Specific evolution means increasing adaptation and general evolution means increasing adaptability. Though both Steward and White used concepts of evolution, the idea of evolution is less important than their turn to some type of techno-environmental causation where priority is given to the material basis of social life. Steward’s cultural ecology has found particular acceptance among archaeologists and some cultural anthropologists, for example, Andrew Vayda and Roy Rappaport, have further refined and elaborated Steward’s work by analyzing the relationship between culture and environment. In the 1960s the cultural materialist approach to theory became widely used. Conflicts over the issues of evolutionism are really beside the point of the materialist approach which tries to see why things happen and what causes them, not to describe their developmental manifestations.