

Classical Evolutionism

Introduction

Classical Evolutionism, also called **Unilinear Evolutionism**, was one of the earliest theoretical approaches in Anthropology during the 19th century. Rooted in the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment and influenced by **Darwin's theory of biological evolution**, classical evolutionists believed that all human societies evolved in a fixed, progressive manner from **simple to complex forms**. They applied the idea of "**progress**" to culture, assuming that societies moved through **universal stages of development**, culminating in what they considered "civilization."

This theory emerged in a context of colonial expansion, industrialization, and increasing encounters with non-European societies, which European scholars wrongly classified as "primitive" or "backward." The works of **Edward Tylor (UK)**, **Lewis Morgan (USA)**, and **James Frazer (UK)** systematized this perspective and became foundational to early anthropology, despite later criticisms.

Core Features of Classical Evolutionism

1. Unilinear Cultural Development

Classical evolutionists proposed that all societies evolve through the **same fixed sequence of developmental stages**, typically categorized as:

- **Savagery** (hunting-gathering, animism)
- **Barbarism** (horticulture, tribal structures, polytheism)
- **Civilization** (urbanization, writing, monotheism, industrial society)

Edward Tylor and **Lewis Morgan** were the main proponents of this view. Morgan, in his book *Ancient Society (1877)*, systematically divided human cultural development into these stages, associating each with specific technological and social innovations (e.g., invention of fire, pottery, metallurgy, writing).

Example: Morgan placed the Iroquois society in the "middle barbarism" stage due to their horticultural economy and matrilineal kinship system, while Victorian England was placed at the peak—"civilization"—due to literacy, state institutions, and Christianity.

Scholarly Remark: Anthropologist **Robert Lowie** (1937) criticized this scheme as overly schematic and historically blind, noting that "there are no universal stages applicable to every society; each culture must be understood on its own terms."

This feature ignored the **diversity and multilinearity** of cultural development. Not all societies followed the same path; for example, many indigenous societies remained non-literate yet developed complex cosmologies, legal systems, and political institutions.

2. Ethnocentrism

Classical evolutionists placed **European (especially British)** society at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy, often viewing **non-Western cultures as 'primitive', 'childlike', or 'undeveloped'**. This ethnocentric bias colored their interpretations and justified colonial domination as a “civilizing mission.”

Example: James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, referred to African tribal rituals and beliefs as “survivals” of an earlier magical stage, implying that they were fossils of a lower stage of human evolution, while Western scientific rationality was seen as the apex.

Scholarly Remark: Franz Boas, the founder of cultural relativism, sharply criticized this view. He argued that such hierarchies were **not scientific** but based on **Western prejudice**. In his words, “There is no high or low culture—each culture must be understood within its own historical context.”

Ethnocentrism in classical evolutionism contributed to **colonial ideology**, portraying indigenous people as backward and in need of Western guidance, and overlooking the **sophistication and adaptation** embedded in their ways of life.

3. Psychic Unity of Mankind

Despite their ethnocentrism, classical evolutionists held a **progressive and humanistic belief** in the **psychic unity of mankind**—the idea that all humans share the same basic intellectual capabilities and will, over time, arrive at the same cultural destination.

Edward Tylor insisted that the intellectual processes of so-called “primitive” people were **not inferior**, just less developed due to environmental or historical factors. This allowed for a **scientific explanation of culture**, as opposed to racial or biological determinism.

Example: Tylor’s explanation of animism as a rational, if flawed, attempt to explain phenomena (such as dreams or death) implies that early humans used reason, albeit in culturally limited ways.

Scholarly Remark: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown later acknowledged that Tylor’s psychic unity provided the philosophical basis for **cross-cultural comparison**, but stressed that actual cultural outcomes were shaped by **social structures**, not just mental capacities.

This concept encouraged a belief in **universal human potential**, but when combined with unilinear thinking, it falsely assumed that **all cultures were simply**

at different points on the same road, rather than on **diverse and equally valid paths**.

4. Comparative Method

The **comparative method** was central to classical evolutionist research. Anthropologists gathered data from **travel accounts, missionary reports, classical texts, and ethnographic records**, comparing cultural traits like myths, family structures, or religious practices across societies.

By identifying **similarities between 'modern savages' and ancient civilizations**, they attempted to reconstruct the **early stages of human history**. This method viewed contemporary tribal societies as **living fossils**, offering a window into humanity's prehistoric past.

Example: Tylor used burial practices, totemism, and ancestor worship from various cultures to infer the **evolutionary origin of religion**. Morgan compared kinship terminologies across Polynesian, Native American, and Indo-European societies to argue for a universal trajectory in family development.

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917)

Pioneer of Cultural Anthropology

1. Introduction

Edward Burnett Tylor was a British anthropologist often regarded as the **father of cultural anthropology**. His work laid the foundation for studying human societies scientifically, especially through the concept of **culture**. He believed that just as biological organisms evolve over time, **human culture also evolves** from simple to complex forms.

2. Definition of Culture

In his famous book *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor gave one of the earliest and most influential definitions of culture. He described culture as:

“That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

This definition emphasized that culture is **learned**, not inherited biologically. It includes not just visible practices like clothing and food, but also **invisible aspects like ideas, values, and language**.

3. Cultural Evolution: Stages of Human Development

Tylor believed that all societies evolve through **the same basic stages**, which he divided into:

a. Savagery

- This is the earliest and simplest stage.
- Societies depended on **hunting and gathering**.
- Tools were very basic (like stone tools).
- Religion at this stage was based on **animism** (the belief that natural things like rivers, trees, or animals have spirits).

b. Barbarism

- Societies began to practice **agriculture** and **animal domestication**.
- Social structures became more complex (clans and tribes).
- Religion evolved to **polytheism** (belief in many gods).
- Metal tools and pottery were introduced.

c. Civilization

- Marked by the use of **writing**, development of **states and cities**, and emergence of **organized religions**, especially **monotheism** (belief in one God).
- Societies developed **science, laws, and formal institutions**.

Tylor believed that **every culture moves forward** from savagery to civilization, though some may progress faster than others. This is known as the **unilinear theory of cultural evolution**.

4. Theory of Religion: Animism

One of Tylor's most important contributions was his **theory of the origin of religion**, especially his concept of **animism**.

- According to Tylor, **animism** was the **earliest form of religion**.
- He believed early humans observed **life and death, dreams, and natural forces**, and concluded that everything had a **spirit or soul**.
- Over time, this belief in many spirits developed into **polytheism** (many gods), and then finally into **monotheism** (one god).

For example, seeing a dead person in a dream may have led people to believe that the spirit lives on after death—this could be the beginning of ancestor worship or belief in ghosts.

Tylor's theory showed that **religion evolved logically** from basic human experiences, not from irrational superstition.

5. Criticism

- Tylor's theory assumed that all societies evolve in the **same sequence**, which ignores cultural diversity.
- His approach was **Eurocentric**, placing European civilization as the highest stage of development.
- The comparative method was based mostly on **second-hand data** (missionary reports, travelers' accounts), not on direct fieldwork.
- Later anthropologists like **Franz Boas** argued that cultures must be studied in their **own context**, not judged by European standards.

2. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881)

Pioneer of Kinship Studies and Cultural Evolution

1. Introduction

Lewis Henry Morgan was an American anthropologist, ethnographer, and trained lawyer, best known for his groundbreaking studies on **kinship systems** and his theory of **social evolution**. His major work, *Ancient Society* (1877), developed a **unilinear theory** of how societies evolved from primitive to advanced stages, especially by looking at their **technology, family systems, and political institutions**.

Morgan combined **fieldwork**, especially with the **Iroquois tribes of North America**, and **comparative analysis** of global cultures to formulate his theories, making him one of the earliest systematic anthropologists.

2. Three Stages of Cultural Evolution

Morgan, like Tylor, believed that all societies pass through **three major stages of development**. However, he used **technological advancements** and **social institutions** (especially family and property systems) as indicators for these stages:

a. Savagery

- The earliest and most primitive stage.
- Characterized by **hunting and gathering**, use of **fire**, and **basic tools** like clubs and the **bow and arrow**.
- Social units were loosely organized around kinship.

Example: Aboriginal Australians and early African tribes that relied on foraging and simple tools were considered in this stage by Morgan.

b. Barbarism

- The middle stage, marked by significant technological and social advances.
- People began **domesticating animals, practicing agriculture**, making **pottery**, and settling in permanent villages.

- Kinship groups became more structured into **clans and tribes**.

Example: Early agrarian societies in Mesopotamia or the pre-Aztec civilizations of Mesoamerica.

c. Civilization

- The highest stage, distinguished by the use of the **alphabet, writing systems**, development of **cities, states, law**, and **organized religion**.
- Social organization became more complex, with the rise of private property, formal governments, and class systems.

Example: Greek and Roman civilizations, ancient China, and the Indus Valley Civilization.

3. Kinship and Social Structure: Morgan's Lasting Legacy

Morgan's most influential work came from his **field research among the Iroquois** in New York. He meticulously studied their **kinship terminology**, family structures, and clan organization.

- He discovered that **different cultures classified relatives in different ways**, depending on how societies organized marriage, inheritance, and residence.
- He distinguished between **classificatory kinship systems** (where relatives are grouped under broad terms like "mother" or "brother") and **descriptive systems** (where each relation has a specific term, like "maternal uncle").

Example: In many Native American societies, a man might refer to both his biological father and his father's brothers as "father" (classificatory system), whereas in European societies, each is given a different term.

4. Influence on Marx and Engels

Morgan's ideas had a major impact beyond anthropology. His work *Ancient Society* deeply influenced **Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels**. In fact, **Engels's book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884)** was directly inspired by Morgan's research.

- Morgan's model of **primitive communism**—where property was shared and families were organized communally—helped Marxists build their **materialist conception of history**.
- He showed that **social evolution was not just technological, but also economic and political**, laying the groundwork for **historical materialism**.

According to Engels, Morgan proved that **private property and patriarchy were not natural**, but emerged historically with civilization.

5. Criticism

Despite his contributions, Morgan's theories have received several critiques:

- **Unilinear Evolution:** His idea that all societies move through the same fixed stages is now seen as **oversimplified** and **ethnocentric**.
- **Western Bias:** Like Tylor, Morgan ranked European civilization at the top of human development, implying that non-Western cultures were "less evolved."
- **Data Limitations:** Many of his comparisons were based on **second-hand reports** or **limited fieldwork**, especially outside North America.
- **Overemphasis on Kinship:** Later anthropologists found that while kinship is important, other factors like economy, ecology, and religion also shape societies.

3. James George Frazer (1854–1941)

Anthropologist of Myth, Magic, and Religion

1. Introduction

James George Frazer was a Scottish anthropologist and classical scholar, best known for his famous work *The Golden Bough* (1890). He explored **mythology, magic, and religion** in a comparative and evolutionary framework. Although he was less scientific and more speculative than Tylor and Morgan, Frazer's writings significantly influenced the **study of religion, folklore, and comparative mythology** in early anthropology.

His approach was mainly **armchair-based**, relying on ancient texts, travelers' accounts, and missionary reports. Despite not conducting fieldwork, Frazer's extensive documentation and bold comparative insights gave anthropology a rich starting point for examining **religious belief systems as stages of intellectual development**.

2. Three-Stage Evolution of Human Thought

Frazer proposed that **human thought evolves in three major stages**, moving from supernatural explanations to rational understanding. This became a core framework in **classical evolutionism**, particularly in understanding religion.

a. Magic

- The earliest form of human thinking.
- People believed they could **control nature** through spells, charms, or rituals.
- Magic was seen as **mechanical and automatic**: if a ritual was performed correctly, a desired effect (like rain or harvest) would follow.

Example: A rain dance performed by tribal communities was not just symbolic but believed to cause actual rainfall.

b. Religion

- When magic failed to explain or control nature, people turned to **gods or supernatural beings** for help.
- Religion involved **prayers, offerings, and worship**, shifting from manipulation to **appeasement** of divine forces.

Example: Agricultural societies praying to fertility gods or river deities during droughts. Frazer categorized **polytheism, ancestor worship**, and **monotheism** as more advanced religious stages.

c. Science

- The final and most advanced stage.
- People began using **observation, reason, and experimentation** to explain natural phenomena.
- Science replaced both magic and religion as the dominant way of understanding the world.

Example: Instead of praying for rain, people now study meteorology and use irrigation systems to solve drought problems.

4. Views on Religion and Culture

Frazer did **not see early belief systems as foolish or primitive**. Instead, he believed they were **logical attempts** by early humans to make sense of the natural world.

- **Magic** was a rational system based on faulty logic (e.g., sympathetic magic: "like produces like").
- **Religion** emerged when humans recognized the failure of magic and turned to spiritual explanations.
- **Science** evolved as the most reliable method based on evidence and repeatability.

As a result, Frazer's work introduced the idea that **modern and ancient minds share the same basic rationality**, even if their knowledge differs—a key idea in early anthropology.

5. Criticism

Frazer's work, while rich in detail and imagination, has been critiqued on several fronts:

- **Armchair Anthropology:** He never conducted fieldwork, relying instead on second-hand sources.
- **Overgeneralization:** His sweeping comparisons often ignored the unique cultural context of each society.

- **Eurocentric Bias:** Like Tylor and Morgan, Frazer assumed that Western science was the final and superior stage of evolution.
- **Determinism:** He believed that all societies would eventually abandon religion in favor of science—an assumption not borne out by modern anthropological research.

Criticisms of Classical Evolutionism

1. **Ethnocentrism:** Evolutionists viewed European societies as superior, reducing other cultures to mere steps on a linear path to "civilization."
2. **Lack of Empirical Fieldwork:** Most theories were based on **second-hand accounts**—missionary reports, travelers' logs, and classical texts—rather than **ethnographic fieldwork**.
3. **Oversimplification:** Human societies were forced into rigid evolutionary stages, ignoring the **complex, diverse paths** that different cultures have taken.
4. **Neglect of Historical Context:** Evolutionists treated cultures as static, failing to account for **historical events**, ecological settings, and internal dynamics of change.
5. **Assumption of Psychic Unity:** Though seemingly progressive, the idea that all minds work alike ignored **cultural relativism** and **contextual differences** in worldview.

PYQ Insights

1. UPSC tests awareness of broad schools of thought—evolutionism vs others.

Q (2002): *"Universal cultural evolution."*

2. Comparative theory questions assess ability to contrast Classical and Neo-Evolutionism.

Q (2010): *"Point out the differences in the concepts of Classical Evolutionism and neo-evolutionism in socio-cultural anthropology. Which stage of Prehistoric culture is known as cultural evolution and why?"*

3. Morgan is tested through his theory of kinship and social organization.

Q (2015): *"How did Morgan explain the evolution of marriage, family and socio-political organization & how did other evolutionists disagree with his explanation?"*

4. Students must differentiate Evolutionism from Diffusionism.

Q (2015): *"How do Diffusionism & Evolutionism differ as explanations of culture change?"*

5. Focused questions on Morgan's classification systems remain relevant.

Q (2021): *“Critically evaluate Lewis Morgan’s classification of family.”*

6. Shifts from classical schools are tested through reactionary frameworks like Historical Particularism.

Q (2024): *“Discuss historical particularism as a critical development to the classical evolutionism.”*

Speculative Insights

1. Likely focus on Tylor’s theory of religion and animism.

Probable Q: “Critically discuss Edward B. Tylor’s theory of animism and its role in the evolution of religion.”

2. Integration of Frazer’s magic-religion-science continuum with cultural logic.

Probable Q: “Explain Frazer’s stages of the evolution of human thought. How does his work reflect the comparative method in anthropology?”

3. Interlinking kinship theory with evolutionist assumptions may be tested again.

Probable Q: “How does Lewis Henry Morgan relate kinship systems to socio-political evolution?”

4. UPSC may test critiques of unilinear evolutionism from a post-colonial perspective.

Probable Q: “Why is classical evolutionism considered ethnocentric? Illustrate with reference to colonial narratives.”

5. Connection between classical evolutionism and Marxist anthropology (Morgan’s influence on Engels).

Probable Q: “How did Lewis Henry Morgan influence Marxist interpretations of cultural and social evolution?”

6. Theory-based questions integrating fieldwork vs literary methods may emerge.

Probable Q: “Compare and contrast the methodological approaches of Tylor, Morgan, and Frazer in studying early societies.”