History, Man, and Reason

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It is obvious that those aspects of the theory of biological evolution which we have discussed, as well as the prevalence of a belief in an overriding law of historical development, would have been sufficient to engender a theory of Social Evolution. However, that theory, as it developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, was also fed by other interests and streams of thought. Among these was an interest in comparative law, an interest in the discovery and interpretation of prehistoric artifacts, and an increasing interest in the systematic and comparative study of the beliefs and practices of "the uncivilized races." These interests were not, of course, wholly new. As we have noted, throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century, there had been attempts to formulate a comprehensive view of human history and human progress, and such attempts necessarily presupposed some beliefs—however vague—concerning the early history of mankind. In addition, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, particularly in France and in Scotland, political and social philosophers had attempted to answer specific questions concerning early human history in a more precise way than had formerly been done. While such questions were not entirely neglected during the first half of the nineteenth century, they had become less prominent. Nevertheless, they suddenly came to occupy one of the main centers of interest and debate among social theorists. This interest can be seen in an amazing series of works written by men trained in the law who attempted to reconstruct the nature of ancient law, with special reference to kinship, marriage, and property relations. The materials for such studies were, at first, largely drawn from Greek and Roman sources and supplemented by references to contemporary "savage" tribes, with the latter materials gradually taking on ascendancy. As examples of such works and of the rapidity with which they followed one another, only the following need be mentioned: Henry Maine’s *Ancient Law* (1861), Bachofen’s *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), McLennan’s *Primitive Marriage* (1865), and Lewis H. Morgan’s studies of kinship, which had begun with his earlier analysis of the Iroquois and which he developed systematically over many years, publishing *Systems of*
Consanguinity and Affinity in 1871 and Ancient Society in 1877. Furthermore, these legally oriented works were by no means the only studies which, within this brief span of years, dealt with questions of the early history of mankind. For example, both Tylor’s Researches into the Early History of Mankind and Lubbock’s Pre-Historic Times were, like McLennan’s work, published in 1865; Darwin’s Descent of Man and Tylor’s Primitive Culture were both published in 1871, the same year as Morgan’s Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity. Thus, questions of social evolution came into prominence only very shortly after the Origin of Species had been published. However, it is necessary to repeat that some of these studies—and particularly those deriving from comparative law—were wholly independent of Darwinian theory or of any prior form of evolutionary theory in biology. It is striking, for example, that as late as 1877, in Ancient Society, when Morgan was forced to speculate on the characteristics of man in his earliest state, he twice made reference to Lucretius but mentioned Darwin only once; and this reference was only for the purpose of rejecting Darwin’s quite cogent argument that promiscuity was not likely to have been the earliest stage in the relations between the sexes in human life. Thus, it is indisputable that full-fledged theories of social evolution could be held, and were held, quite independently of any reference to evolutionary theory in biology.

On the other hand, some discussions of early man were very closely linked with topics connected with the theory of biological evolution. In the first place, the dating of the archaeological discoveries of early stone implements was connected with evolutionary theory, for it rested on similar interpretations of geological and paleontological evidence. Thus it is not surprising to find that evolutionists took the keenest interest in questions relating to the authenticity of the discoveries of Boucher de Perthes at Abbeville, Falconer, Lyell, and Lubbock, among many others, having gone to examine the site itself. The authentication of these discoveries immediately extended the period during which human beings, as makers of tools, had assuredly existed, thus allowing more time to be assigned for the gradual processes of social evolution. The evolutionary context in which this archaeological evidence was discussed is especially clear in Lubbock’s Pre-Historic Times, for Lubbock was a naturalist and a Darwinian; and in the concluding chapter of that book—a discussion greatly admired by Darwin—the evidences of this connection were unmistakable.

However, there was a second connection between evolutionary theory in biology and social evolutionism which was even more important than the discovery that primitive man was a contemporary of animals long extinct. This was the need to establish some continuity between the mental attributes of the higher animals and those characteristics which could account for man’s development of a social form of existence, and for the gradual expansion of social life until it included the whole range of culture. This was all the more important since, as we have seen, the Darwinian view of the mechanisms of evolutionary change demanded that such change should proceed by extremely small variations and very slow modification as to type. To show the possibility of establishing these very slight gradations between the higher animals and the ruder savages was the task
which Darwin set himself in the *Descent of Man*. It must be recognized, however, that neither Darwin nor Lubbock linked organic and human evolution into a single indissoluble system, as Spencer had done. And the most careful and influential investigator of cultural development, E. B. Tylor, explicitly separated his own theory of progression as it applied to the elements in culture from "the modern naturalist's doctrine of progressive development," on the grounds that neither his method nor the evidence available to him were "suitable for the discussion of this remoter part of the problem of civilization." Nonetheless, his method did in fact constitute a most striking parallel to the method which Darwin had applied to questions concerning the origin of species, as one can note when Tylor says:

A first step in the study of civilization is to dissect it into details, and to classify these in their proper groups. . . . What this task is like, may be almost perfectly illustrated by comparing these details of culture with the species of plants and animals as studied by the naturalist. To the ethnographer, the bow and arrow is a species, the habit of flattening children's skulls is a species, the practice of reckoning numbers by tens is a species. The geographical distribution of these things, and their transmission from region to region, have to be studied as the naturalist studies the geography of his botanical and zoological species.5

This parallelism should not be taken as establishing an influence of Darwinian theory on Tylor's thought; nor, on the other hand, should it be construed as accidental. Rather, wherever one finds an attempt to establish social evolutionism on an empirical basis, one finds important methodological assumptions similar to those by means of which Darwin had established his theory of the origin of species. Thus, in addition to some instances of a direct influence of Darwinism on social evolutionism, there was an important, indirect, methodological influence: the triumph of the comparative method in biology led to a wholesale and sometimes uncritical use of it in sociology. Even for those who did not regard social evolution as part of a single and total evolutionary process, and even when its truth was not taken to be a corollary of Darwinism, it was widely believed that the only scientifically correct way of understanding man's history was through the use of the comparative method, in which different societies were seen as representing different stages in human development.6 It is to a consideration of this assumed parallelism between the comparative method in biology and in anthropology that I now turn.

As we have noted, the only evidence which it was possible to muster concerning the origin of biological species was indirect in character: it consisted in inferences drawn from the distribution of resembling forms of plant and animal life, from paleontological evidence, from the existence of rudimentary or vestigial organs, and from the embryological development of the more complex forms of animal life. In the case of cultural change, however, there was a great deal of evidence which was far more direct, since written records, and other cultural artifacts, made it possible to trace many of the very radical changes in practices and beliefs which had occurred in the course of human history. Nevertheless, this
information was restricted in scope. For example, little could be discovered concerning those earliest men, whose primitive stone tools gave the merest suggestions concerning their form of life. Furthermore, while explorers, missionaries, sailors, and travelers brought back reports concerning the customs of a host of savage tribes, there was a lack of knowledge concerning the earlier history of these peoples: accurate information concerning their origins was not available, and it was not possible to know what the beliefs and practices of their own ancestors had been. Thus, the historical record was wholly inadequate as a basis for constructing a general history of mankind; if such a history were to be constructed it, like evolutionary theory in biology, would have to rest on indirect evidence.

Now, the assumption that it should be possible to construct a general history of mankind which would include all peoples, regardless of race and of the specific characteristics of their culture, did not face the initial obstacles which had to be faced by the theory of biological evolution. As compared with the enormous differences to be found in the various species of plants and animals, the biological characteristics of man were so similar that it seemed necessary to assume that all of the various peoples of the earth were related to one another. The problem then became one of accounting for both the similarities in the cultures of various groups and for the differences among them. In general, two theories vied for ascendancy: one assumed an original common level of culture in all groups, with the present state of non-civilized races being due to retrogression from an earlier, higher stage of civilization; the other was a progressionist theory, according to which the earliest human forebears started in an extremely primitive condition, that there had been gradual progress, but that not all races had evolved to the same extent. It is somewhat surprising today to note the extent to which leading anthropologists regarded it as necessary to combat the theory of retrogression. Not only was that theory logically vulnerable at many points, as Tylor showed, but almost no positive evidence could be mustered in support of it. A progressionist view, on the contrary, could call on the history of technology, as revealed through archaeological findings, to establish what one might have thought could not be doubted: that there had been a gradual accumulation of skills from pre-historic times to the present. However, while it was a relatively simple matter to trace the main outlines of the earliest forms of technological development in various parts of the world, the problem of tracing the development of the non-material aspects of culture was more difficult. To be sure, the artifacts which were found permitted conjectures concerning the skills which underlay their manufacture, and from these artifacts, plus other remains, inferences could be drawn concerning the domestication of animals, the types of foodstuffs which were presumably eaten, and the like. While this evidence was more conjectural and less detailed than the palaeontological evidences for evolutionary theory in biology had been, it was quite solid as far as it went. Nevertheless, its scope was severely limited with respect to the inferences it could yield.

To trace a process of cultural evolution, whether in the material or the non-material aspects of culture, the archaeological method which consisted in compar-
ing items which were found, so to speak, at different "chronological levels," had to be supplemented by comparisons which suggested a geographical spread over time. It will be recalled that one of the methods by which Darwin had laid the foundation for his hypothesis concerning the origin of species was through tracing resemblances among the forms of life to be found in neighboring regions, with particular reference to his observations on the Galapagos Islands. The view that specimens which might otherwise have been regarded as constituting distinct species were really varieties, having a common ancestry, was argued on the basis of a combination of their close resemblances and their geographical distribution. This method, which was independent of paleontological evidence, was precisely the same as the method that was now used in some areas of the cultural domain. In fact, in philology it had already been used before Darwin in tracing genealogical connections among the Aryan (Indo-European) languages, and Darwin had cited this example in connection with the theory of organic evolution itself. The same method now came to be successfully used in tracing relationships among many different cultural phenomena. The results did not immediately establish a great body of information concerning the earliest forms of man's social life, and even with respect to tools and basic techniques the possibility of multiple independent origins posed a major problem which had not really existed with respect to evolutionary theory in biology. Only the gradual, systematic accumulation of evidence could help to overcome these difficulties. In the meantime, however, Tylor—who had contributed very greatly to the formulation of the evidence in a variety of fields, and who recognized the difficulties in the interpretation of this evidence—formulated the concept of "survivals," which served as an analogue in cultural matters to the role played by rudimentary or vestigial organs in the sphere of biology. These survivals he defined as "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved." In the third and fourth chapters of Primitive Culture, Tylor gave a host of examples in which survivals served to establish historical connections which no one would be likely to challenge. However, in some of these examples, and in similar instances in his Researches into the Early History of Mankind, he used the concept of a survival in a way which is quite obviously suspect. I shall illustrate this dubious use by the example with which his Researches opens.

In the first paragraph of that book Tylor suggests that the jeweled earrings worn by modern European women are to be understood through relating them to forms of decoration which are to be found among contemporary primitive peoples, such as "the rings and bones and feathers thrust through the cartilage of the nose; the weights that pull the slit ears in long nooses to the shoulders," etc. Thus, he remarks, "the modern earring of the higher nations stands not as a product of our own times, but as a relic of a ruder mental condition." Now, what is here of interest is not the question of whether, without further ado, the modern earring is to be understood by placing it in a particular lineage of development,
nor whether it actually conforms to Tylor's own later definition of a survival. What is of importance to note is his assumption, as illustrated in this example, that practices to be found among contemporary primitive peoples are to be taken as reliable indices regarding the practices characteristic of the remote ancestors of modern European man.

Tylor was not, of course, alone in making this assumption; it had been taken over from earlier speculative philosophers of history, it was accepted by those concerned with comparative law, with systematic sociology, and with interpreting the archaeological data concerning pre-history. For example, this methodological assumption was perfectly explicit in the full title of Lubbock's book: *Pre-Historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*. And in that work Lubbock, taking his cue from the methods of evolutionary theory in biology, said:

Deprived, therefore, as regards this period [of pre-history], of any assistance from history ... the archaeologist is free to follow the methods which have been so successfully pursued in geology—the rude bone and stone implements of bygone ages being to the one what the remains of extinct animals are to the other. The analogy may be pursued even farther than this. Many mammalia which are extinct in Europe have representatives still living in other countries. Much light is thrown on our fossil pachyderms, for instance, by the species which still inhabit some parts of Asia and Africa; the secondary marsupials are illustrated by their existing representatives in Australia and South America; and in the same manner, if we wish clearly to understand the antiquities of Europe, we must compare them with the rude implements and weapons still, or until lately, used by the savage races in other parts of the world. *In fact, the van Damie n and South American are to the antiquary what the oppossum and the sloth are to the geologist.*

Now, I do not wish to suggest that Lubbock allowed this analogy to distort his account of contemporary primitive societies, nor that he introjected into genuinely prehistoric times too many speculative conjectures derived from contemporary sources. And Tylor explicitly mentioned the dangers of thinking that the conditions of life among "the savage tribes of modern times" must in all respects resemble the conditions which may have obtained in the early history of the human race. Others, however, had been less cautious. In his essay on "Progress: Its Law and Cause," and throughout his later work, Herbert Spencer assumed that he could reconstruct the early social organization of man in terms of his general law of evolution, and that he could actually document the truth of that law through reference to contemporary primitive societies. Similarly, Comte had believed that one of the means through which he could establish his law of the three stages was by using the comparative method with respect to presently existing societies, among them contemporary primitive societies. The underlying principle of this speculative method of a rational reconstruction of human history has never been more clearly expressed than by McLennan, who—in speaking of the tribes of Central Africa, the wilds of America, the hills of India, and the islands of the Pacific—said:

These facts of to-day are, in a sense, the most ancient history. In the sciences of law
SOCIAL EVOLUTIONISM

and society, old means not old in chronology but in structure: that is most archaic which lies nearest to the beginning of human progress considered as a development, and that is most modern which is farthest removed from that beginning.\textsuperscript{17}

A partial justification for classifying this widely scattered set of contemporary primitive societies with what McLennan identified as the primitive stage of barbarism is to be found in the fact that written language does not appear in either. Of course, other similarities, such as the degree of development of various forms of technology, can be found. However, in order to reconstruct the history of the human race in terms of traits exhibited by contemporary primitive societies, these societies must themselves be graded in serial order. Although he invoked examples drawn from Africa, America, Asia, and the islands of the Pacific, McLennan did not believe that there were any serious obstacles to discovering such an order. In this connection, he said:

The preface of general history must be compiled from the materials presented by barbarism. Happily, if we may say so, these materials are abundant. So unequally has the species been developed, that almost every conceivable phase of progress may be studied, as somewhere observed and recorded. And thus the philosopher, fenced from mistake, as to the order of development, by the interconnection of the stages and their shading into one another by gentle gradations, may draw a clear and decided outline of the course of human progress in times long antecedent to those to which even philology can make reference.\textsuperscript{18}

In short, he was willing to assume that one did not need actual chronological evidence to classify societies in an order which showed how they had developed from the earliest to the latest.

Precisely the same mistaken assumption was made in Morgan's \textit{Ancient Society}: a classificatory system by means of which social institutions were compared was taken as representing the chronological order in which they had actually developed. The mistake in this view may be easily recognized when one reflects on the following statement made by Morgan in his chapter on "The Sequence of Institutions Connected with the Family":

\begin{quote}
Like the successive geological formations, the tribes of mankind may be arranged, according to their relative conditions, into successive strata. When thus arranged, they reveal with some degree of certainty the entire range of human progress from savagery to civilization.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Geological strata are known to be formed by processes following a definite chronological order, and the fossils and skeletons and artifacts contained in them can be dated according to the objective order in which the various strata were laid down. However, in the case of "arranging" presently existing tribes in a linear order of development "according to their relative conditions," no such objective measure of sequence is given. In other words, before one should assume that a process of development has proceeded in one direction rather than another, or that it has always proceeded in the same direction, it is necessary to have independent evidence regarding the chronological order of the data which con-
firm that development; and this is evidence which Morgan did not possess. The point is so obvious that it now seems surprising that an investigator as dedicated and rigorous as Morgan actually was, should have been betrayed into so elementary an error; yet, one finds at least traces of precisely the same error in the far more cautious and penetrating treatment of the evolutionary problem in Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*.

The primary reason why such errors occurred is to be found in the presence of assumptions regarding progress which were analogous to the assumptions which had led Darwin and others to look upon biological evolution as being inherently progressive in its over-all tendency. However, there was one additional factor in the case of social evolutionism which calls for special mention: it was the error of comparing the mental and emotional attributes of the adult members of so-called savage tribes with the mental and emotional attributes of children. It is surprising how frequently such a comparison was made. Even Tylor, who employed the comparison with considerable caution, attempting to remain close to facts concerning uses of language, methods of counting, and the like, introduced the topic with the following remarks:

> The trite comparison of savages to “grown-up children” is in the main a sound one, though not to be carried out too strictly. In the uncivilized American or Polynesian, the strength of body and force of character of a grown man are combined with a mental development in many respects not beyond that of a young child of a civilized race. . . . Few educated Europeans ever thoroughly realize the fact, that they have once passed through a condition of mind from which races at a lower state of civilization never fully emerge; but this is certainly the case, and the European child playing with its doll furnishes the key to several of the mental phenomena which distinguish the highly cultivated races of mankind from those lower in the scale.

When the capacities of savages are compared with those of children, it is easy to draw the further inference that their capacities also throw light on the nature of early man, for it had been widely assumed—as we have already noted in the case of Comte—that the stages through which civilization passes must resemble the stages through which the individual passes in his development toward maturity. In biology, such an assumption seemed to have been more than an analogy, and to have been established as a fact through the evolutionary interpretation of embryology—a fact summarized in the doctrine that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The confusing merger of the latter principle with a comparison of the mentalities of savages and children can be seen in the following passage from Lubbock:

> Savages have often been likened to children, and the comparison is not only correct, but also highly instructive. Many naturalists consider that the early condition of the individual indicates that of the race,—that the best test of the affinities of a species are the stages through which it passes. So also it is in the case of man; the life of each individual is an epitome of the history of the race, and the gradual development of the child illustrates that of the species.
Here Lubbock assumes that contemporary savages represent the early history of mankind, and that the principle of ontogeny repeating phylogeny therefore clinches one’s right to compare the capabilities of children and of savages. However, it should have been obvious to a collector of pre-historic artifacts that the characteristics of early man could not possibly have been similar to those of a European child of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, he was aware of various talents possessed by primitive peoples of contemporary times which were sufficiently unusual to evoke astonishment on the part of European travelers; for example, he discussed the skill of Australian natives in their use of spears and boomerangs, a skill which must have been paralleled in constructing these implements. To compare adults who possessed such talents with children of our own civilization would seem to be wholly arbitrary. However, like others of his generation, Lubbock was thoroughly dominated by the conviction that there had been a single progressive direction in evolutionary change, and this conviction fostered the view that contemporary savages represented what were only the first stages of evolutionary change, just as a child represents only a stage in the individual’s intellectual, emotional, and moral development. It is the assumptions underlying this progressive conception of evolutionary development that I now wish to examine.

As we noted in the case of Darwin, the interpretation of biological evolution as a progressive development was not primarily a function of the specific mechanisms by means of which he had explained the origin of species, but grew out of his attempt to gain a synoptic view of the total history of life upon the earth. Such was also the case with respect to the theory of social evolution. That theory, as it had developed prior to the nineteenth century, and as it flourished in that century, was not primarily concerned with tracing the specific changes in particular societies, nor with the histories of particular races or cultural communities; rather, it attempted to survey the whole of human development. In the latter half of the nineteenth century this was taken to mean tracing the intellectual and cultural evolution of man from the earliest times when human beings evolved from higher mammalian forms to the present state of civilization in Western Europe.

In tracing this course of development there were, as we have seen, close parallels between the paleontological evidence for organic evolution and archaeological evidence concerning the early development of technology. What is unmistakable concerning this technological development is that, from a stage at which all tools were “rude,” “simple,” and “primitive,” they had developed in refinement, complexity, and efficiency; furthermore, this developmental tendency was not only obvious as a result of the archaeological investigations of prehistoric times, but was clearly evident within the course of recorded history. In addition, all of the evidence suggested that the accumulation of new tools to satisfy diverse needs had been continuing at an accelerating rate. This point was stressed by Lyell and later by Morgan, each of whom claimed that the movement could be assumed to be proceeding at a rate of increase approximating geometrical pro-
Historicism

portions. Thus, in so far as the development of technology was concerned, there was scarcely any room for doubt that, considering it from an over-all point of view, there had been, and was continuing to be, progress.

With respect to this progressive development, there were at least two points at which it suggested a comparison with Darwin’s conception of the over-all pattern of evolutionary development. In the first place, there had in general been an obvious growth from simplicity toward complexity along the axis of time: the earliest artifacts, taken as a group, were far simpler in structure than those which had come late in the historical development of man, just as the earliest fossils indicated simplicity of structure as compared with such late developments as the primates. In the second place, some of the implements which were in use among some primitive tribes closely resembled implements which could be dated as having existed very early in human history; thus, like the still extant branches of some of the earliest forms of plant and animal life, these tribes were taken as representing an early stage in what had in most cases been a general developmental process.

Now, assuming these parallels to have been influential (as there is no reason to doubt that we should), it readily becomes apparent why it was thought that contemporary primitive societies could be regarded as representing an earlier stage in the cultural life of man. Not only was their technology simpler, but the absence of written language and the existence of only rudimentary forms of arithmetical reckoning—to mention only two further items—suggested a comparison between their present state and the earlier stages through which mankind must, at one time, have passed. It then became incumbent upon the social evolutionist to arrange these tribes in a serial order, according to the places which they had occupied in a similar development of forms of marriage, property relationships, religious beliefs, and the like. However, it must again be recalled that evolutionary theory demands that one establish the existence of genealogical connections, not merely that resemblances should be found. Here the social evolutionist encountered grave difficulties, for evidence as to the earlier forms of these institutions was not, in most cases, available. To be sure, there were materials through which the historical backgrounds of European institutions could be traced, for example, through classical and biblical sources; and such knowledge was also becoming increasingly available with respect to even more ancient civilizations. While this was in many cases sufficient to establish particular patterns of developmental connection, it could not possibly prove that wherever there were resembling institutions there must have been genealogical connections. To be sure, in biology the mechanisms of evolution made it likely that marked resemblances were to be attributed to such connections, even though Darwin did acknowledge that there might be contrary cases in which convergence had taken place. In the case of social evolution, however, there was no equally convincing single, or unified, theory of the mechanisms of institutional change; as a consequence, resemblances should not have been taken as decisive indices of historical connections, and an ordering of societies from the supposedly most simple to the most complex should not have been taken as indicative of the order in
which social evolution had in fact taken place. In short, even for those who took
the Darwinian theory as justifying a progressive interpretation of evolution—an
interpretation epitomized in Darwin’s own simile of the Tree of Life—there was
insufficient evidence to show that there had been an analogous development,
which was orderly and progressive, in the history of man’s social life. We
must therefore ask on what presuppositions this conviction ultimately rested. I find
these to have been two: one might be called a spiritual interpretation of man’s
nature, and the other a conviction that there was consistency and uniformity in
all things, human as well as non-human. These two presuppositions may fairly be
said to parallel the two presuppositions which we found to be basic in a pro­
gressivist interpretation of biological evolution. In that case, as we saw in Darwin,
there was a theological motivation for a belief that the new, evolving forms of
life had higher significance than those out of which they arose; there was also
the presupposition that whatever tendencies one finds uniformly repeated in a
sequence of events must be taken as expressive of underlying laws which serve to
govern the direction of change. To be sure, the spiritual interpretation of man
with which we shall here be concerned was less closely connected with orthodox
theology than Darwin’s original motivation had been. (In fact, the most orthodox
theological position provided strong resistance to every progressivist view of
human institutions.) It is also necessary to say that the uniformitarianism of the
social evolutionist was generally less harsh than earlier necessitarianism had been.
However, as we shall see, the parallel was not insignificant.

As an example of the spiritual presupposition which underlay a progressivist
view of social development, I shall cite the conclusion of Tylor’s chapter on “The
Development of Culture” in *Primitive Culture*:

We may fancy ourselves looking on Civilization, as in personal
figure she traverses the
world; we see her lingering or resting by the way, and often deviating into paths that
bring her toiling back to where she had passed by long ago; but, direct or devious, her
path lies forward, and if now and then she tries a few backward steps, her walk soon
falls into a helpless stumbling. It is not according to her nature, her feet were not
made to plant uncertain steps behind her, for both in her forward view and in her onward
gait she is of truly human type.

And, in a more theological vein, we find that after discussing Asa Gray’s recon­
ciliation of the Darwinian theory with natural theology, Sir Charles Lyell con­
cluded his treatise on *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* in the follow­
ing manner:

It may be said that, so far from having a materialistic tendency, the supposed introd­
tion into the earth at successive geological periods of life,—sensation,—instinct,—the
intelligence of the higher mammalia bordering on reason,—and, lastly, the improvable
reason of Man himself, presents us with a picture of an ever-increasing dominion of
mind over matter.

These sentiments, coming from the most distinguished representatives of their
respective fields of scientific inquiry, are not to be lightly dismissed: the evolution
of mankind was a progressive development in which the spiritual capacities of
the race could be seen as unfolding, and in the long process attaining a new and higher development.

Should such views be considered as mere sentimentality, it is only necessary to recall that, at the time, there was an insufficient appreciation of the capacities of primitive peoples, and because of this there was a widespread feeling of their utter remoteness from modern Western man. In this connection it may be useful to cite Darwin’s account of his own reactions to those primitive peoples with whom he came into contact on the voyage of the Beagle. In a passage summarizing the impression gained from his voyage, he wrote:

Of individual objects, perhaps nothing is more certain to create astonishment than the first sight in his native haunt of a barbarian—of man in his lowest and most savage state. One’s mind hurries back over past centuries, and then asks, could our progenitors have been men like these?—men, whose very signs and expressions are less intelligible to us than those of the domesticated animals; men, who do not possess the instinct of these animals, nor yet appear to boast of human reason, or at least of arts consequent on that reason. I do not believe it is possible to describe or paint the difference between savage and civilized men. It is the difference between a wild and tame animal: and part of the interest in beholding a savage, is the same which would lead every one to desire to see the lion in his desert, the tiger tearing his prey in the jungle, or the rhinoceros wandering over the wild plains of Africa.29

When one bears in mind this vivid reaction to the unfamiliar conditions of primitive life, one can better understand what would otherwise appear to be the unmitigated smugness of a passage such as the following, drawn from Darwin’s rejection of the theory of retrogression:

To believe that man was aboriginally civilized and then suffered utter degradation in so many regions, is to take a pitifully low view of human nature. It is apparently a truer and more cheerful view that progression has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals, and religion.30

Thus Darwin, no less than Tylor and Lyell, conceived of progress in terms of a development of man’s spirit, and as we see in The Descent of Man the social factors which were uppermost in his mind when he considered the nature of human development were not primarily connected with subsistence, family, regulative organization, property, or technological growth, but with man’s intellectual powers and with the foundations of social morality.31

Lewis H. Morgan’s Ancient Society and Spencer’s Principles of Sociology show evidence of different concerns. Instead of dealing with the progressive development of various specific aspects of human culture, considered topically, they viewed the evolution of mankind as a process in which types of society succeeded one another, and in which it was important to reconstruct the pattern of relationships among the institutions in each type. Thus, unlike some of their contemporaries (e.g., Lubbock), and unlike many later evolutionists (e.g., Westermarck), they did not use the comparative method on isolated fragments of societies: what-
ever their errors with respect to the necessity of establishing chronological and
genealogical connections before claiming to have established an evolutionary
pattern, their theories did not neglect the fact that the various customs and insti-
tutions which characterize a given society belong together in a functioning whole.
In this respect Comte may be viewed as one of their forerunners. In addition,
their views paralleled his in the emphasis which they placed on the necessity with
which progress occurred. Neither Morgan nor Spencer regarded progress as being
guided by deliberation, individual decision, or by the moral qualities inherent
in man. For Morgan, progress was both natural and necessary, as we see in the
paragraphs with which *Ancient Society* opens:

The latest investigations respecting the early condition of the human race, are tending
to the conclusion that mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and
worked their way up from savagery to civilization through the slow accumulations
of experimental knowledge.

As it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of
savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of
civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with
each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress.

Morgan’s belief that there was universality in this natural order rested on an
assumption which may be compared to Lyell’s uniformitarianism in geology, for
he assumed “that the experience of mankind has run in nearly uniform channels;
that human necessities in similar conditions have been substantially the same;
and that the operations of the mental principle have been uniform in virtue of
the specific identity of the brain in all races of mankind.”
Furthermore, like the
geologist, he assumed that the processes had gone on in a slow, cumulative man-
ner over very long periods of time, and that, in general, increments to knowledge
were not sudden and discontinuous discoveries, but the results of these cumula-
tive processes. We read, for example, in one of the epigraphs which introduces
*Ancient Society* that “all the elements of culture—as the arts of life, art, science,
language, religion, philosophy—have been wrought by slow and painful efforts,”
and in another, “Our wondrous civilization is the result of the silent efforts of
millions of unknown men, as the chalk cliffs of England are formed of the con-
tributions of myriads of foraminifera.” And at another place Morgan himself
commented, “the phonetic alphabet came, like other great inventions, at the end
of successive efforts . . .”
Throughout his account of mankind’s ascent, Morgan
emphasized uniformity and continuity; the accidental, the sporadic, the discon-
tinuous, seem to have no place in his view of the past. And thus, like Comte, his
view of social development seems to be that progress was governed by an inner
necessity; unlike Comte, however, Morgan apparently did not articulate a
philosophic position which served as a means of justifying this assumption.
In Spencer’s evolutionism there was, however, an insistence on total evolution
in accordance with one comprehensive law. To be sure, he did not insist that
every society had progressed; in fact, in contrast to other evolutionists, he ceded
considerable ground to those who regarded contemporary primitive societies as
having retrogressed from an earlier, higher state of civilization. Nevertheless, taking an over-all view of the history of specific institutions, as well as of the history of mankind as a whole, he believed in progressive development, with higher types of social organisms emerging, and with more heterogeneity and more complete integration being achieved. If one examines Spencer's sociology in an attempt to discover the means by which he accounted for these processes of evolutionary change, one finds that, at various points, his explanations followed different patterns. Sometimes the changes were explained by an appeal to what were taken to be inherently intelligible psychological factors governing development; sometimes the explanation was in terms of the usefulness of an institution for the survival of the society possessing it; sometimes, on the other hand, the explanations were almost wholly speculative and were dominated by an assumed parallel with what Spencer held to be true in biology. In all cases, however, he claimed that social evolution had proceeded in terms of the one general, overarching law of development. It was by means of this law that he classified all of the various types and constitutions of society, and at the end of that classification he dogmatically stated:

In this order has social evolution gone on, and only in this order does it appear to be possible. Whatever imperfections and incongruities the above classification has, do not hide these general facts—that there are societies of these different grades of composition; that those of the same grade have general resemblances in their structures; and that they arise in the order shown.

In this statement one sees the mistake which we have already noted in the case of Morgan: the order according to which societies had been arranged by Spencer was not an order which had been established by independent chronological evidence, but was a function of the system of classification which he had employed. Spencer's failure to see this error may, like Morgan's, be attributed to a general conviction that there necessarily was progress in human affairs. Even had he not been predisposed to believe that change is fundamentally progressive, his conception of the nature of ultimate scientific laws would have led him to impose an orderly sequence on all of the different forms of social institutions which he sought to survey. This followed from the fact that he believed that the fundamental laws of nature are concerned with the order in which changes appear, that is to say, he conceived of them as developmental laws. Given the fact that he regarded the institutions of modern Western society as most recent in origin, it was necessary for him to arrange all other institutional forms in an orderly sequence which led up to them. Thus, the system of classification which he adopted appeared to him to constitute a natural and necessary order, and mankind's history was divided by him into stages through which societies had gradually evolved toward their present, more advanced state.

There is a noticeable difference between the necessitarianism which one finds in Spencer's social evolutionism, or even in that of Morgan, and the temper of a progressivist view such as Tylor's. The contrast between these views may merit further scrutiny because of the help it will afford in discussing philosophic issues
which are connected with historicism, issues with which our next chapter is to be concerned.

In connection with this contrast it must first be insisted that Tylor was no less convinced than was Spencer of nature's uniformity and of the universal applicability of natural laws. Almost at the outset of *Primitive Culture*, he wrote:

> Our modern investigators in the sciences of inorganic nature are foremost to recognize, both within and without their special fields of work, the unity of nature, the fixity of its laws, the definite sequence of cause and effect through which every fact depends on what has gone before it, and acts upon what is to come after it.\(^38\)

He then argued that one must accept the same assumption with respect to human affairs generally, and, more specifically, with respect to the history of mankind. While admitting that it was not currently possible to establish a philosophy of history capable of “explaining the past and predicting the future phenomena of man’s life in the world by reference to general laws,” Tylor attributed this inability to the amount of knowledge which was presupposed, not to any inherent impossibility in the task.\(^39\) He therefore chose what he considered to be a narrower field of inquiry, not attempting to deal with history as a whole, but “with that branch of it which is here called Culture, the history, not of tribes or nations, but of the conditions of knowledge, religion, art, custom, and the like.”\(^40\) While one can assuredly doubt that this did in fact constitute a narrower field of inquiry, Tylor believed it to be more manageable. While he recognized that there would be difficulties in establishing general laws applicable to the development of culture, this was nonetheless the task which he set himself. It is precisely here that one can note at least an implicit difference between Tylor’s view of the nature of such laws and the view which was assuredly characteristic of Comte and of Spencer, and which it is probably also justifiable to attribute to Morgan. The difference lies in the fact that Tylor did not assume that the general laws which could presumably explain cultural change were laws regulating or governing the successive steps in the processes to which they applied. One notes this, for example, in his statement that the field of culture is more manageable than history because the facts can be classified into distinct groups, and these groups can be individually investigated with respect to their distribution, the specific changes which they underwent, and the causal connections existing among them.\(^41\) The same point is evident in Tylor’s interest in the problem of whether particular developments were to be attributed to historical contacts or were in all likelihood the results of independent invention.\(^42\) This was not a problem which was relevant to the investigations of those who believed in the necessary, stadial evolution of culture: laws of development were assumed by them to be determinative of the course of change which was characteristic of all societies. Finally, we may note that in most cases in which Tylor made concrete suggestions concerning the types of laws which explain cultural phenomena, these did not define and summarize a necessary direction in which change proceeded; instead, he attempted to show how facts concerning language, myth, magic, and the like, depend upon general principles governing the processes of human thought.\(^43\) Unfortunately,
these facts concerning Tylor's views have usually been overlooked, for his position has been chiefly described with reference to his theory of the development of religious belief from animism through polytheism to monotheism. However, even within this field, it is clear that he did not hold that there was a necessary sequence governing the course of all phases of this pattern of development. For example, he pointed out that the notion of a Supreme Deity evolved in different forms among different primitive peoples; he also used culture-contacts and specific survivals to account for differences among those peoples who held roughly similar forms of belief. In short, Tylor's views regarding the evolution of religion consisted in the attempt to classify the wealth of detail regarding different religious doctrines in certain broad categories, and to establish a general chronological order among these categories, as one might establish a chronological sequence in general types of technology; he did not seek to lay down a specific law of stages through which the religious beliefs of each society must necessarily pass.  

That Tylor did not hold to a strict form of social evolutionism does not of course mean that he was not a progressionist: as we have already noted, his general interpretation of man as a spiritual being, like that of Charles Lyell, demanded that the footsteps of civilization should not falter. In the case of Tylor, this belief rested on a conviction that all progress depended upon intelligence, and upon the growing uses to which intelligence could be put. Thus, he was convinced that those arts which were useful would not, in general, disappear. Furthermore, he believed that just as one could trace "the history of an upward development" in the arts, so it was also the case that the history of man's mental condition shows "an upward progress, a succession of higher intellectual processes and opinions to lower ones." This progress was, furthermore, linked to a growth in morality, for Tylor was a convinced utilitarian in all aspects of social theory. For example, in the concluding chapter of his Anthropology, he first argued that the differences between the lower and higher races of men with respect to their morality rested upon differences in imagination and understanding, and then went on to show that there had been progressive advance not only in moral belief but in all of the major institutional forms by means of which social authority was exercised. In fact, Tylor envisioned modern Western culture as having entered a new stage of progress by virtue of its advances in knowledge. In the concluding paragraph of his Anthropology, he said:

Had the experience of ancient men been larger, they would have seen their way to faster steps in culture. But we civilized moderns have just that wider knowledge which the rude ancients wanted. Acquainted with events and their consequences far and wide over the world, we are able to direct our own course with more confidence toward improvement. In a word, mankind is passing from the age of unconscious to that of conscious progress.

Given this belief, one can understand the special value which Tylor attached to ethnological studies. Noting the persistence of custom and the fact that all institutions have their roots deep in the past, the ethnologist was in a position to trace the history of the opinions of the day, enabling his contemporaries to judge
which were justifiable, which might still be of limited use, and which were in
fact surviving forms of superstition. Thus, on a level far higher than ever be­
fore, knowledge was the means through which mankind could continue to ad­
vance, with the comparative science of ethnology playing a new and crucial role.

It is not our present concern to trace the decline of faith in progress, whether
that faith was based on the theory of natural selection, whether it derived from
the idea of an inevitable law of directional change, or whether, as in the case of
Tylor and others, it was claimed to be a consequence of a steady improvement in
knowledge. Rather, we shall now turn our attention to the manner in which the
theory of biological evolution and theories of social evolution were related to
historicism.

Were historicism merely a matter of looking at all questions historically, there
could be no doubt that every evolutionary theory would involve an acceptance
of that thesis, for by definition an evolutionary account of any phenomenon
purports to be a historical account. There are, however, two different ways of re­
garding evolutionary change. One is to regard it as a sum of successive, individual
changes, where the pattern which one can retrospectively trace is regarded as
being adequately explained as due to specific conjunctions of events at successive
points in time. On such a view, evolutionary change is not a function of some
inherent tendency for events to succeed one another in any particular pattern. It
should now be clear that the mechanisms by means of which Darwin sought to
account for the transmutation of species and for the adaptations of organisms to
their environments, would have favored this view. On the other hand, it is also
possible, in looking back on an evolutionary development, to interpret it as hav­
ing had, from the outset, a tendency to move in one direction rather than
another. Once such a morphic tendency is assumed, and a particular course of
development is expected, change in that direction is taken as progressive, whereas
an absence of change, or changes occurring in other directions, are considered as
instances of stagnation, of retrogression, or as having been, in one way or another,
aberrant. As we have seen, this was not an uncommon view with respect to
biological evolution; and when Darwin surveyed the whole sequence of living
forms, he tended to look upon evolution as a single, progressive process, even
though such an interpretation did not actually conform to the mechanisms he
invoked in order to explain the changes which had occurred. In fact, it is
probably not misleading to say that there always exists a tension between these
two ways of viewing a historical process. On the one hand, that which is an ob­
ject of historical investigation may be regarded as constituting a whole only to
the extent to which there existed a particular sequence of events which were
causally related; or, on the other hand, such a process may be regarded as a
whole which dominates its parts, tending to control what can affect it or what
can become a part of it.

These two views have quite different consequences with respect to the explana­
tion of historical events, and also with respect to the evaluation of those events.
As we have seen in our discussions of earlier philosophies of history, the assump­
tion that there had been a necessary directional tendency in human history led
to an acceptance of historicism. And the theory brought forward by anthro­
polo
gists, which held that there had been a unitary process of social evolution in material culture and in the development of institutions, had exactly the same consequences. In fact, historicism only declined in anthropology when the tendency to view the human past as a single line of development was abandoned.

The connection between social evolutionism and historicism can readily be seen even in the modified evolutionism of Tylor, who remarked:

It is indeed hardly too much to say that Civilization, being a process of long and complex growth, can only be thoroughly understood when studied through its entire range; that the past is continually needed to explain the present, and the whole to explain the part.\(^49\)

On the basis of this assumption it would follow that to understand a particular social institution it would not be sufficient to see it in relation to its specific historical antecedents, and in relation to the needs of the people living at a particular place and time; one would have to view it as an aspect in the whole developmental process of which it was only a fragmentary part. As we have noted, this position did not correspond to the actual methods followed by Tylor. However, it did conform to the methodological assumptions which were present in the social evolutionism of Comte and of Spencer, as well as those which we have seen to be characteristic of McLennan and even of Morgan. In each of their theories the manner in which the lineage of a particular phenomenon was established did not consist in tracing its actual historical connections, but in attempting to show what place it occupied in a developmental series which ranged from the simplest and presumably earliest forms to those forms of institutional life which characterize contemporary Western society. That this was indeed the manner in which the comparative method was used as a principle of explanation can be illustrated by a quotation from John Fiske:

The point of the comparative method, in whatever field it may be applied, is that it brings before us a great number of objects so nearly alike that we are bound to assume for them an origin and general history in common, while at the same time they present such differences in detail as to suggest that some have advanced further than others in the direction in which all are travelling; some, again, have been abruptly arrested, others perhaps even turned aside from the path.\(^50\)

Then, turning more specifically to the results of the comparative method as applied to social evolution, Fiske continued:

When we have come to survey large groups of facts of this sort, the conclusion is irresistibly driven home to us that the more advanced societies have gone through various stages now represented here and there by less advanced societies; that there is a general path of social development, along which, owing to special circumstances, some peoples have advanced a great way, some a less way, some but a very little way; and that by studying existing savages and barbarians we get a valuable clue to the interpretation of prehistoric times. All these things are today commonplaces among students of history and archaeology; sixty years ago they would have been scouted as idle vagaries. It is the introduction of such methods of study that is making history scientific.\(^51\)
As we have had occasion to note with respect to Comte and to Spencer, this conception of a scientific history—as contrasted with traditional methods of historical inquiry—was characteristic of the new science of society. The laws thus established on the basis of a comparative method were laws of directional change; and it was these, rather than specific historical connections, which were taken as explanatory of the characteristic sequences of major institutional events.

Turning to the problem of the evaluation of specific events, one can readily see the consequences of this assumption. Given a necessary, progressive development, all earlier forms of belief were to be considered rudimentary, or as stages necessary for further advance. Thus, the truth of a belief or the merit of a custom was not evaluated in terms of what was asserted by it, nor in terms of the consequences to which it led, but in terms of the place which such a belief or custom occupied in a larger process of historic development. John Morley summarized both the nature of historicism as a mode of understanding, and also its evaluative implications, in his characterization of what he termed "the Historic Method," saying:

The Historic Method may be described as the comparison of the forms of an idea, or a usage, or a belief, at any given time, with the earlier forms from which they were evolved, or the later forms into which they were developed, and the establishment, from such a comparison, of an ascending and descending order among the facts. It consists in the explanation of existing parts in the frame of society by connecting them with corresponding parts in some earlier frame; in the identification of present forms in the past, and past forms in the present. Its main process is the detection of corresponding customs, opinions, laws, beliefs, among different communities, and a grouping of them into general classes with reference to some one common feature. It is a certain way of seeking answers to various questions of origin, resting on the same general doctrine of evolution, applied to moral and social forms, as that which is being applied with so much ingenuity to the series of organic matter. The historic conception is a reference of every state of society to a particular stage in the evolution of its general conditions.

Then, turning to the evaluative implications of this method, Morley continues:

Character is considered less with reference to its absolute qualities than as an interesting scene strewn with scattered rudiments, survivals, inherited predispositions. Opinions are counted rather as phenomena to be explained than as matters of truth and falsehood. Of usages, we are beginning first of all to think where they came from, and secondarily whether they are the most fitting and convenient that men could be got to accept. In the last century men asked of a belief or a story, Is it true? We now ask, How did men come to take it for true? In short the relations among social phenomena which now engage most attention, are relations of original source, rather than those of actual consistency in theory and actual fitness in practice. The devotees of the current method are more concerned with the pedigree and genealogical connections of a custom or an idea than with its own proper goodness or badness, its strength or its weakness.

I do not propose to enter into dispute concerning the evaluative thesis of historicism, for I believe that if its explanatory thesis can be shown to be false, the foundation for its evaluative thesis will have been undercut. It is, therefore, to a criticism of that explanatory thesis that I shall next turn.