
UNIT 1 EVOLUTIONISM*

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Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, the learners should be able to:

- explain the context of evolutionism in social and cultural anthropology;
- delineate the contributions of the proponents of the evolutionary thoughts; and
- discuss the limitations of the classical evolutionary theory.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term 'evolutionism' is derived from the Latin word *evolu'tio*, from *e-*, 'out of', and *volu'tus*, 'rolled'. The literal meaning of the term is 'unrolling'. In earlier times Roman books were written on lengths of parchments and rolled onto wooden rods, so as to read they had to be unrolled or 'evolved' (McCabe 1921:2). Around the seventeenth century the term evolution was used in English to refer to an orderly sequence of events, particularly one in which the outcome was somewhat contained within it from the start (Carneiro 2003:1). In this unit we shall discuss how the early thinkers in anthropology looked at the question of development and change in society and culture through their perspectives on evolution. The evolutionary perspective emerged in the late nineteenth century and gained popularity in the late twentieth century in anthropology.

1.1 THE BEGINNINGS OF EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHTS

By the sixteenth century there was a realisation among scholars that, human beings were a part of the natural schema and not a divine creation. This was the

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time when the scientific world was moving away from the Church towards a rational perspective. This was a significant paradigm shift from a religious perspective to a scientific perspective in understanding phenomenon. Let us now look at some of the early works before anthropology was established as a discipline.

Adam Ferguson, John Miller, and Adam Smith were Scottish thinkers, in the early 1700 who had reflected on social evolution. They contended that all societies pass through four stages: (i) hunting and gathering, (ii) pastoralism and nomadism, (iii) agricultural, and finally (iv) commerce. For these thinkers the theoretical base was their own national experience of being united with England in 1707 and the effect it had on the development of trade in what came to be known as the United Kingdom (Zaman 2011:6) Among the early thinkers Montesquieu (1689-1755) had proposed an evolutionary scheme consisting of three stages: hunting or savagery, herding or barbarism, and civilization. In his work *De l' esprit des loix* (The Spirit of Laws), he made a cross-cultural comparative study of legislative systems. He looked at the legal system as closely intertwined with other facets of the society like politics, economy, kinship, family and religion. Montesquieu's work was based on first hand data which he gathered on a small sample size and supplemented with secondary sources. He gave the classification of the different stages of the society as- Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization. This arrangement was accepted and used by the nineteenth century social theorists such as Tylor and Morgan in their works (Seymour-Smith 1986:105). Morgan in his work had further subdivided both savagery and barbarism into three stages- lower- middle and upper. In the next section we would examine the works of some of the scholars who contributed to the rise of anthropological thoughts that was based on the concept of evolution.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you understand by the term evolution?

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- 2) Name the Scottish thinkers, in the early 1700, who had contended that all societies pass through four stages.

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- 3) Describe the four stages that society passes through, as proposed by the early Scottish thinkers.

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1.2 EARLY THINKERS

The rise of anthropology as a discipline has its roots in the Western world. The industrialisation of the European nations and their need for resources to feed their industries and markets, led to the exploration of new spaces, non-western regions, that were different from the Western world in their way of life. Based on the stories brought back by the travelers, the missionaries, the administrators etc., the scholars indulged in speculative thinking based on the comparative method of study used in Biology. The comparisons were based on the premises that these societies and their cultures were not at par with their existing Western cultures (civilization) but were at different levels of maturing or evolving into ‘civilized’, and those believed to be the farthest away from European civilization were placed at the bottom of the scale and labelled ‘Primitive’. This comparative approach of judging a culture based on one’s own culture was criticized by the later anthropologists and labelled as ‘ethnocentrism’. Voluminous works were published during these times by scholars who later came to be known as ‘arm chair anthropologist’ as they were gathering information on hearsay and building up their theories of social and cultural growth of the non-western societies without collecting first hand data. Sir James Frazer’s work “*The Golden Bough*” is worth mentioning here, till date a legendary work, that ran into twelve volumes.

1.2.1 Herbert Spencer

For long in the academic world the term evolution has been linked with the work of Charles Darwin. This supposition however, needs introspection. In his work the *Origin of Species*, the term evolution appears in the sixth edition, 1872. By this time the term ‘evolution’ was already in vogue in the social sciences owing to Herbert Spencer’s work. In the year 1851, Spencer had used the term in his work *Social Statics* to explain ‘progress’ (pg. 63 cf. Carneiro 2003:3). The term evolution was explicitly defined by Spencer in his initial volume “Synthetic Philosophy” in ‘First Principle’ stating ‘Evolution as a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; through continuous differentiations and integrations’ (Spencer 1863:216 cf. Carneiro 2003:5). His major work constitutes an understanding of the process of change from the simple to complex and from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, i.e., how one part is different from the other. The detailed explanation of how evolution had occurred in Human societies can be found in *The Principles of Sociology* (3 vols, 1876-1896). The learners might find it noteworthy that the term “Survival of the Fittest” was coined by Spencer to explain the concept of struggle among the different members in a society wherein the ones with merit rise, leading to the elimination of the weaker ones, thus, highlighting the process of social selection.

1.2.2 Edward Burnett Tylor

Edward B Tylor is reckoned not only for assuming the first chair of anthropology at the Oxford University, thereby establishing anthropology as a discipline, but also for providing one of the most classic definitions of 'Culture' in his work '*Primitive Culture*' (1871) that is still being used. In defining culture, Tylor emphasised that there was a single Culture that was possessed by humans and different societies possessed culture in different stages of development. This explained why, even though all humans were alike as a single species, they displayed such variations in their culture. Tylor provided us with the sequence of the evolution of religion as an institution of human societies, as he did not understand society in wholistic terms but as co-existence of different institutions existing parallel to each other.

Tylor defined the earliest form of religion as Animism; a belief in the soul or the belief in a dual body of spirit and material body. The speculation over the phenomenon of death and of dreams provided the base for emergence of the belief in soul. He speculated that primitive men must have thought that in dream the soul was able to leave the body temporarily and wander around, while in death it leaves the body permanently. The real source of life or *anima* thus, is the soul and the body thrives on its existence. According to Tylor, evolution of religion started from Animism and stage by stage evolved into other systems of beliefs-like in ancestors, in sacrifice and other rituals. Animism was followed by Naturism, Totemism, Polytheism till finally the ultimate stage of religion, namely Monotheism and the belief in a Supreme God comes about. Thus, Christianity-the religion of the Europeans of that time was seen as the highest form of religious belief, while the other societies were speculated to be at the different levels in the evolutionary stages.

Tylor used the concept of 'psychic unity of (hu)mankind' to explain that all humans have the same capacity to think alike and that there is a "general likeness in human nature". Thus, Tylor gave the examples of culture parallels stating that the earliest humans must also have thought in synchronic ways to produce similar cultural traits. Taking the example of tool making techniques and the pottery of the prehistoric period, Tylor demonstrated that the stone tools were similar in different parts of the world that had no direct contact like in Europe and India. These tools and pottery types also went through various stages of development and more progressive types were seen with the passage of time.

While exploring the evolution of culture Tylor put forward the doctrine of 'survivals' as the remnants of those traits that have now lost their function, but remain by force of habit or inertia of customs for change. Among the many examples that Tylor provided, one was of the unused button behind the waist of a jacket, that now has lost its functional value or the clay pottery that we no longer use but keep as decoration pieces and as a link to the past. The survivals in terms of religion were shown with examples of persistence of ancient rituals and beliefs, the meaning of which is long forgotten, yet still continue to be a part of the religious performances. Thus, survivals are those traits that either in their original form or in modified forms are carried over from the past, as a force of habit or as a way of showing respect to the traditions or as a kind of identity marker. They no longer have any real function but are of symbolic and decorative value only. But survivals provide a real clue to tracing what had existed in the past of a culture and were seen as a method of reconstructing evolutionary sequences.

1.2.3 L.H. Morgan

Lewis Henry Morgan an American anthropologist was a trained lawyer by profession. His interest in the native way of life of the Iroquois was triggered by the law suit based on the loss of land rights, he was handling for them. Morgan spent a long time among the Iroquois as it is said that the Iroquois were practically living in his backyard, and thus, was involved in first hand collection of data, making his work different from the other the arm chair anthropologist of his time like Tylor.

L.H. Morgan's major contribution to the world of anthropology was the study of kinship terminologies and kinship systems. Among the Iroquois, Morgan studied the kin relations and the way the kinsmen address each other. One of the major observations of Morgan was that among the Iroquois a child addresses mother and mother's sister by the same term and father and father's brother by the same term. While the father's sister's children and mother's brother's children were called cousins. Morgan identified the Iroquois kinship as *classificatory kinship system* as it clubbed together two different persons with the same kin term. He called the English system of naming kin as *descriptive kinship system*, because in it, the kin terms used for primary kin are not used for anyone else. While studying the Ojibway tribe, he realised that their kinship terms were similar to that of the Iroquois, thus confirming to the classificatory system.

Based on his observations, Morgan, presumed that all Native Americans have a classificatory system which later evolved into descriptive system like the English system after passing through the different stages of evolution namely: savagery, barbarism and civilization. The first two stages are marked by classificatory kinship they evolve into the descriptive kinship system, as societies become civilized. Morgan linked types of subsistence activities with the types of kinship systems. When the resources are held collectively as at the tribal level, classificatory system prevails as the clan is the collective owner of property and one clan member is substitutable by others. When property is held by the patrilineage for example, father and father's brother are equal owners of property and hence one can be substituted for the other. With the rise of private property rights and it's passing down through the lines of inheritance "descriptive kin systems evolve, and the nuclear family eventually develops" (Moore 2009:24). This meant that groups that followed the classificatory kinship system were survivals of the 'savage' and 'barbaric' stages. Morgan's finding were published in his two works, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1870) and his master piece *Ancient Society* (1877).

Morgan in his work had stated: "With the production of inventions and discoveries, and with the growth of institutions, the human brain necessarily grew and expanded; and we are led to recognize a gradual enlargement of the brain itself, particularly of the cerebral portion" (Morgan 1887: 37). Morgan presented this concept with the example of the subsistence patterns among societies and how it improved as the societies progressed. Morgan's evolutionary scheme remained a question of debate among anthropologists, yet he influenced other thinkers, as his work brought forth the materialistic factors highlighting the aspect that economic and technological know-how go a long way in shaping the fate of humanity. Fredrik Engels's work was influenced by Morgan's thoughts in *Ancient Society*. Morgan's opinions are reflected in Engle's book, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

1.2.4 J.J. Bachofen

Inspired by Greek and Roman literatures Johann Jakob Bachofen, had theorized the concept of ‘mother-right’ or prehistoric matriarchy. In *Das Mutterrecht* (or Mother Right), published in 1861 Bachofen had looked into the religious and judicial character of matriarchy in the ancient world. He studied grave paintings and their symbolism and interpreted the gender relations as depicted on them as patriarchal, where the woman is symbolized as an object. He equated civilization with the West and with patriarchy, and the matriarchy with a lower state of evolution where society is not advanced enough to think in abstract concepts such as fatherhood and are only aware of biological motherhood. He gave a complex of traits that constituted the mother-right societies and a complex of traits that comprised the father right societies. Thus, for him mother right or father right were not stand-alone concepts but wholistic ones that integrated various material and symbolic dimensions. He imagined a mother right society and described it like a book. The women being the sole parent of the child, through whom descent could be traced, assumed a position of high respect and honour in society. With this assumption Bachofen, laid the foundation for the rule of women in the ‘primitive’ world which he termed as **gynaecocracy**. Though it gave a higher status to women yet Bachofen decried this stage as the primeval stage of anarchy till the reign was taken over by men which led to the progress of the society. The progression from matriarchy to patriarchy saw a decline in the role of women and the increase power in the hands of the males, making them more assertive. The gradual transition from promiscuity to monogamy was also noted. Mother-right existed within the context of primeval, matriarchal religion or Ur-religion.

Sir Henry Maine had based his work on the ancient legal systems of Rome, Islamic Law and the Brahmanical Laws and had opposed the placing of mother right before father right. Maine, in his work *Ancient Law*, (1861) had argued and advocated father right, he established the laws of the people that integrated the social heritage to a particular society, while negating the concept of universalism that was the primary focus of study during that time. McLennan on the other hand based his work on the premises of mother right in *Primitive Marriage*, (1865), where he assumed that since primitive people were only aware of biological motherhood, it was only logical to think that matriliney would be recognized first. He traced the origin of marriage or the regulation of sexuality to the regulation of warfare between groups.

Check Your Progress 2

4) Who coined the term ‘survival of the fittest’? What is its significance?

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5) What are cultural survivals? How do they explain evolution?

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6) What is 'psychic unity of humankind'? How did Tylor use this concept to explain the origin of religion?

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7) Who elaborately studied Classificatory and Descriptive Kinship and established kinship studies within the ambit of anthropological studies?

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8) Define gynaecocracy. How was it used to rank societies in the evolutionary schema?

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1.3 BASIC PREMISES OF THE EVOLUTIONARY SCHOOL

In the earlier section we had discussed some of the works of the anthropologists who had used the evolutionary schema to understand the emergence of society and culture. We had seen that within the context of evolution most believed in the single line of progression from simple to complex, postulating the concept of 'psychic unity' of humankind. i.e., human beings everywhere in the world think in much the same way. Now, let us discuss the basic premises of the evolutionary school.

- 1) **Unilinear Evolutionism:**The evolutionists believed in the development of societies from simple to complex in a precise line of evolution or in a single line of order, moving from a lower to a higher stage or in a line of progression. Thus, classical evolutionary theory is a theory that believes that there is only *one line* for cultural progress.
- 2) **Universal Evolutionism:** The emphasis was on an evolution pattern that was happening across the globe and this was based on the concept of ‘psychic unity of mankind’. Giving rise to questions of the brain capacity of human beings that is also developing as the societies develop from simple to complex. The argument was that all societies would go through the same process as the human brains develop from simple to complex.
- 3) **Single Culture:** As described by Ingold (1986) in his work, the propagators of the evolutionary theory believed that there is only one Culture, with a capital C. The difference that we see in societies across the world is not because they have different cultures, but because they are at different stages of the *same* Culture. Citing examples of ‘Culture parallels’ this phenomenon of a single ‘Culture’ moving from simple to complex was explained by the evolutionists.
- 4) **Sequential Progress:**The evolutionist theorists stated that once the sequence of progress has been established, it will step up from one stage to the other and continue in this sequence in which the society will progress. Each society goes through the same stages but at their own pace.
- 5) **Comparative Method:**The evolutionist basically derived at the concept of evolution of society and culture using the comparative method. The white Europeans also known as the ‘arm chair anthropologists’ used their own societies to set the comparison table, where they placed their own society at the helm of ‘civilization’ and compared all other societies based on this scale.

Check Your Progress 3

- 9) Define universal evolutionism.

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- 10) Explain the comparative method.

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1.4 CRITICISMS OF EVOLUTIONIST THEORY

- a) **Colonisation amplified:** The evolutionary theory in a way on moral grounds justified colonisation. The Europeans ‘white men’, having been put on the highest scale of civilization by the intellectuals of their own breed, justified their plunder of the colonies in the name of ‘civilizing’ them.
- b) **Cultural ethnocentrism:** The white Europeans presenting their own culture as a bench mark for civilization put all other societies on an evolutionary scale. They justified each society as being at different levels of evolution based on their technological knowledge. Thus, giving rise to ‘cultural ethnocentrism’. This concept devalued the comparative method, as it was used mainly to accentuate the scholars own society as ‘superior’ than the societies of the people under study.
- c) **Devoid of Cultural Relativism:** The cultural elements and social institutions are relevant in their own context in each society. The evolutionist while categorising some cultures as simple and others as more complex, did away with the value that was associated with each culture. The evolutionists had treated social institutions such as religion, economy and political systems as forming separate strands, comparing them individually across cultures. Owing to this premises, the value of customs and practices that had its own cultural meaning within the context of that society was lost.
- d) **Lack of empirical data:** The later anthropologists had pointed to the fact that most of the data was conjured as there was no first-hand data collection. The data collected was based on the stories and accounts that came from the travelers, the sailors, the missionaries and the administrative personals. Thus, such works were based on second hand data and the scholars came to be known as arm-chair anthropologists. However, it has also to be noted that a few of them had attempted to collect first hand data during their times like Morgan. Yet there was a lack of a precise methodology and thus, lost out on scientific vigour.
- e) **Missing links:** The later scholars like Franz Boas, Margaret Meads, and others from the American Culture School questioned universal evolution based on the concept of ‘psychic unity of humankind’ as it could not explain cultural variations. Moreover, later studies showed that Morgan’s concept of evolution based on technological progress could not explain Polynesian chiefdoms that were based on complex political systems, yet technologically they were far behind, as even the use of pottery was not known in their culture.

Check Your Progress 4

- 11) List the criticisms levied against evolutionism.

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1.5 NEO-EVOLUTIONISM

The revival of the evolutionary approach may be attributed to Leslie A. White (1900-1975), Julian H. Steward (1902-1972), Elman R Service (1915-1996) and Marshall D. Sahlins (1930-2021) the doyens of cultural neo-evolutionism. The early twentiethth century anthropologists attempted to relook at the work of the classical evolutionary theorists by incorporating the methodology of empiricism and also trying to develop rational criteria of measuring evolution.

Leslie White attributed a special status to culture as it is based on the unique capability of human beings and opined that culture can be represented in symbols. For e.g., a pen is a material, a product of human creation and has a pointed end which is used by human beings to record and communicate meaning through written words therefore, the pen is a symbol for writing, and the national flag of India is a symbol of our country. This ability to create symbols is a unique attribute of human beings. In search of the mechanisms for cultural developments he attempted to establish laws. Culture, according to White, is enabled by communication and it develops based on its own principles and laws. Human culture is ever changing; its dynamism comes from consuming energy. White's ideas were written in two books *The Science of Culture* (1949) and *The Evolution of Culture* (1959). The core of White's evolutionary approach centred upon the consumption of energy. The greater the amount of energy tapped per capita per year, the greater will be the scale of cultural development. The tapping of the animal energy by attaching the plough to these animals has improved agricultural production. A surplus in food has resulted in increasing population and the harnessing of fossil fuels for combustion has led to the industrial revolution. His conception is expressed in a formula $E \times T = C$. Where E is amount of energy used, T is the quality or efficient tools that result in C that is culture. White links the expansion of culture to the energy consumed. However, "a close correlation had been established between the consumption of energy and the development of culture, but establishing a correlation is not enough to provide an explanation. Moreover, White did not explain why complexity emerged in some places and not in others" (Claessen 2002). Hence, establishing a causal connection that growth of culture is caused by consumption of energy is difficult to demonstrate (Claessen 2000).

Julian Steward, a neo-evolutionary anthropologist is regarded as a pioneer of modern cultural ecology. Steward divided evolutionary thought into three divisions, i.e., unilinear, universal and multilinear. Julian Steward's theory was based on his concept of culture in which he describes culture as having a core and a periphery, in his book, *Theory of Culture Change*. This two-layered definition of culture enabled him to identify culture and environment interaction as a driving force for culture change. According to him the core of culture is formed by the interaction between the cultural and environmental variables and comprise the socio-economic aspects of culture. This relationship is dialectical, in that as the culture acts upon the environment, the environment transforms and to adapt to the changed environment, the culture has to transform. Here, Steward's concept of culture shows the influence of the dialectical process of Marxism. The peripheral aspects of culture are those that are not connected directly to the environment and gives to each culture its distinctive character. Since most human societies show only a few modes of adaptation to the environment, the culture cores of various cultures can be fitted into a typology of a few known modes of

adaptation; namely hunting-food gathering, pastoralism, horticulture, agriculture and industrial society. The simpler the mode of subsistence, the more direct the relationship between culture and environment. According to Steward, it is theoretically possible to construct different lines of evolution depending upon the direction taken by the dialectical relationship between culture and environment. But it requires a large amount of data collected over a historical period of time. Steward was able to construct only one line of possible evolution. Since there are several ecological zones in the world, it is possible that evolution could take in multiple directions; therefore, this theory is called the theory of multilinear evolution. After Steward, no one else was motivated to construct any more lines of evolution. The criticism of this theory was that there can be multiple ways in which evolution can take place and it is not possible to determine what variable can be put in the core and which ones in the periphery. However, this model of culture helped to construct models of various modes of adaptation, identifying the core cultural elements that constitute each subsistence type.

Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service were colleagues at the University of Michigan and students of White and Steward and they worked to combine the works of White and Steward. They identified two types of evolution, i.e., 'general' and 'specific' by making a distinction between them. Specific evolution is the adaptation of a particular society to an environment, and it often remains specific to that habitat, like the adaptation of the Eskimos to the Arctic or the bushmen to the Kalahari. General evolution is a general progress of society in which higher forms emerge from lower forms and out do lower forms. Specific represents Steward's multilinear evolution and General evolution resembles White's universal evolution. Diagrammatically, they can both be represented by a tree, with the trunk growing upwards, symbolizing General Evolution and the branches growing in all directions. Specific evolutions. If one has to search for variety in historical developments one has to search for specific evolution of the culture, look for the changes in social institutions of the particular society in a historic perspective. If one looks back at the overall picture of evolution of humankind from the level of hunting -food gathering to industrial society, then one is talking about General Evolution. Service and Sahlins described these two types by using the concepts of Adaptation and Adaptability. The former refers to the ability to survive in a specific niche only and the latter to the capacity to spread over a much larger geographical area. Sahlins gives the example of gun powder used by the Europeans to colonize many regions as an example of adaptability. This spread of a dominant culture was described as adaptive radiation.

Sahlins and Service did not rank the two kinds of evolution and considered the mode of adaptive radiation as often detrimental to the loves of the ones getting over run or colonized. The neo-evolutionists departed from the early classical evolutionist by demonstrating the evolution of particular cultures by the process of adaptation to particular environments.

Check Your Progress 5

12) What is neo-evolutionism?

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13) How are the neo-evolutionists different from the earlier classical evolutionists?

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1.6 SUMMARY

Anthropology has its roots in Europe’s history of colonization and plunder, but also in the desire to understand the cultures they had to rule. An interest in the past of their own culture led to an interest in the history of cultural evolution the result of which was the theory of evolutionism that came up as a ‘speculative history’. Evolutionism, was basically, the white European’s way of classifying the non-Europeans encountered in their journeys, into categories that could explain the differences between them, by a theory of development from lower to higher stages. This led to the invention of the concept of ‘primitive’ societies, labelled as still in a state of infancy, as compared to the matured European civilizations that set the bench mark for the highest point of evolution, thus, bringing in the concept of ‘ethnocentrism’. The white Europeans, judged the non-Europeans on a scale where they put themselves on the highest scale of civilization, justified their plunder of the colonies in the name of ‘civilising’ them. This intellectual approach was not based upon ‘rationality’ or ‘evidence’; nor did it follow any empirical methodology. Thus, the views of such anthropologists based on secondary sources were referred to as “arm-chair approach” devoid of physically observed evidence but only deductive reasoning.

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Refer to section 1.0
- 2) Refer to section 1.1
- 3) Refer to section 1.1
- 4) Herbert Spencer
- 5) Refer to section 1.2.2
- 6) Refer to section 1.2.2
- 7) L.H. Morgan
- 8) Refer to section 1.2.4
- 9) Refer to section 1.3
- 10) Refer to section 1.3
- 11) Refer to section 1.4
- 12) Refer to section 1.5
- 13) Refer to section 1.5