# The drawbacks of Unilinear Cultural Evolution models

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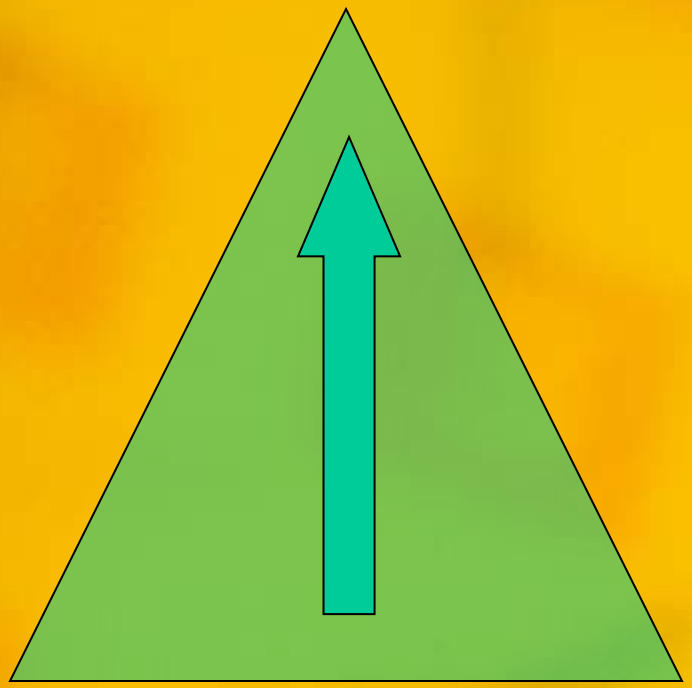
# Cultural evolution models

- **Assume that all cultures developed along one unilinear path**
- **Line up all cultures on a single development or "success" scale**
- **See cultures progressing upward toward perfection**

# The picture in our minds

**“Civilized”**



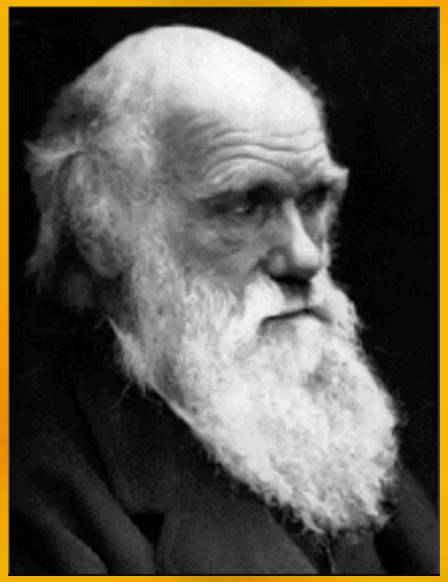
**“Primitive”**

# L.H. Morgan, 1818-1881

- Student of American Indian cultures
- A founder of “anthropology” as scientific field of study

# Morgan:  a child of his time

- **Morgan was contemporary of biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882)**



# L.H. Morgan's "Stages"

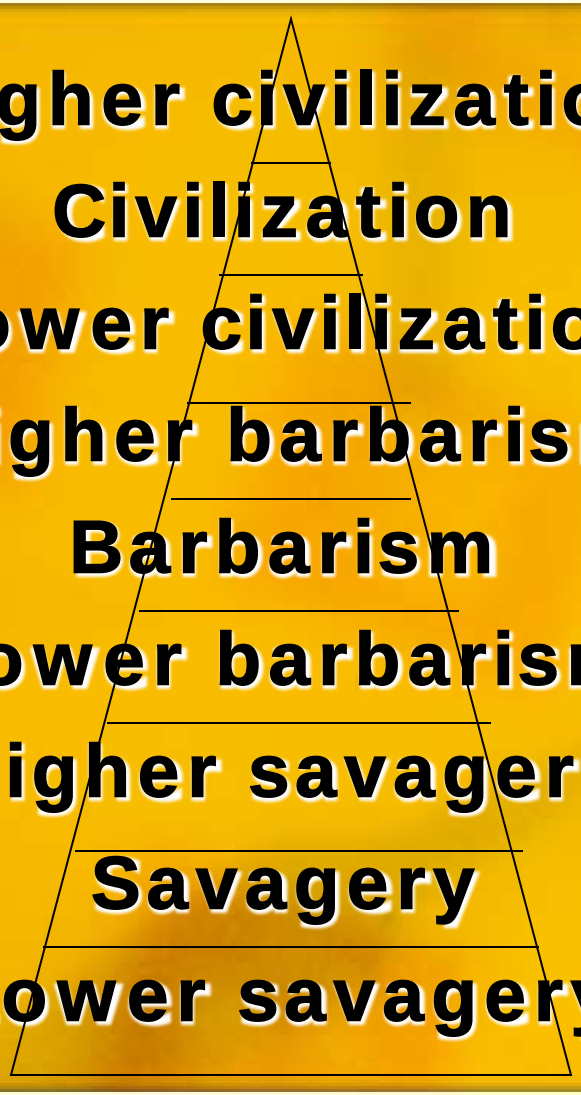
**Morgan saw all cultures evolving through three stages**

- Savagery
- Barbarism
- Civilization

# Cultural evolution models

- Every element of culture moves from simple to complex
- From “primitive” (tribal) to “civilized” (modern Western)

# Pyramid of human development



# Drawback Number One

- **"Cultural evolution" thought focuses on material cultural products**
  - Example: Morgan traced "evolution" of dwellings

# Questions for reflection

- **Is culture only -- or even essentially -- technology and material products?**
- **What about worldviews?**
- **What about language?**

# Drawback Number Two

- **Modern Western culture is held up as the pinnacle of cultural development**
  - Analysis made from etic viewpoint

# Ethnocentric issues

- "They" are not very good at what we are best at
- By evaluating "them" on what we are best at, we miss what they handle more competently than we

# Drawback Number Three

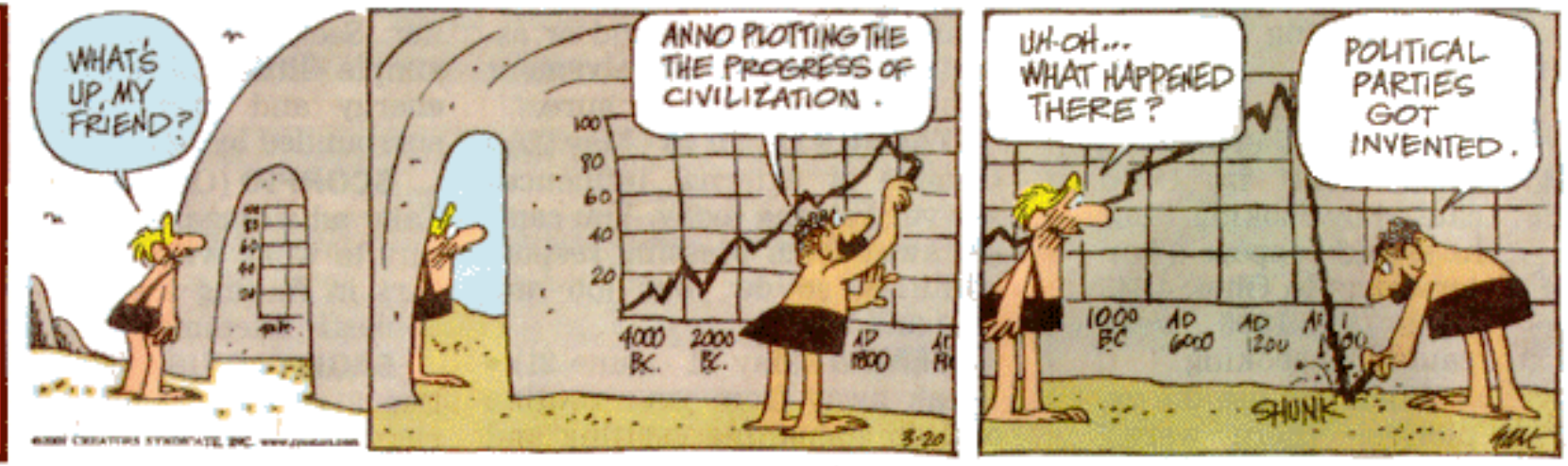
- **Cultural evolution models lump together all societies displaying certain characteristics**

# Drawback Number Four

- **Cultural Evolution often posits a progressive rise in human rationality**
  - Some cultures get labeled as “child-like” and others as “mature” in their thinking
  - Assumes primitive / developed languages

B.

C.


WHAT'S UP, MY FRIEND?
ANNO PLOTTING THE THE PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION.
100
80
60
40
20
4000 BC.
2000 BC.
AD 1800
UH-OH... WHAT HAPPENED THERE?
POLITICAL PARTIES GOT INVENTED.
1000 BC
AD 600
AD 1200
SHUNK

# Question for reflection

- **Paul Hiebert: "Are modern people really all that logical? Did (or do) tribals think in simplistic, prelogical terms?"**

This PowerPoint presentation is available along with related materials and other PowerPoint presentations at
http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/ppt.htm