The drawbacks of Unilinear Cultural Evolution models

Howard Culbertson
Southern Nazarene University
Cultural Anthropology
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

Higher civilization
   Civilization
      Lower civilization
         Higher barbarism
            Barbarism
               Lower barbarism
                  Higher savagery
                     Savagery
                        Lower savagery
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?
• 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
• 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
WHAT'S UP, MY FRIEND?

ANNO PLOTTING THE PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION.

Uh-oh... WHAT HAPPENED THERE?

POLITICAL PARTIES GOT INVENTED.
Question for reflection

• Paul Hiebert: “Are modern people really all that logical? Did (or do) tribals think in simplistic, prelogical terms?”