Sociocultural Evolution

Sociocultural evolution is most simply the idea that social change is patterned and directional—that human societies have evolved from small and simple affairs to large and complex ones. The idea of social evolution has had a rough career in social science, and it is still in disrepute in some circles. Much of the problem has been that earlier formulations of the idea embodied certain assumptions that are unscientific in nature. The idea of progress means that some human societies are superior to others because they are "more advanced." The theory of progress has been used as a justification by some people for dominating and exploiting others. The social evolutionism of the British anthropologists of the nineteenth century presented London society as the highest form of human civilization and depicted colonized peoples as savages and barbarians. Evolutionary ideas were used to support a philosophy of social Darwinism in which the current winners were depicted as better adapted and losers were portrayed as on the way to extinction because of genetic and/or cultural deficiencies. Talcott Parsons' (1966) version of structural/functional evolution presented the United States in a similar light. We consider the theory of progress in more detail below.

In reaction to these problems, some social scientists have embraced a radical cultural relativism in which each society is to be understood in its own terms as a unique constellation of institutional practices. It was assumed that there were no inherently superior social structures, but rather that all human cultures were equal, though different from one another. The ethnographer Franz Boas was the greatest proponent of this approach, and modern anthropology was heavily influenced by his stress on careful fieldwork that recorded the linguistic, spiritual, and material attributes of human societies. The body of knowledge produced by following Boas's approach is a vast resource for our understanding of ways of life different from our own, despite the cultural biases and problems of objectivity of the ethnographers who have "tented with the natives."

Beginning in the 1930s there developed dissatisfaction with cultural relativism because of its lack of concern for developing a science of social change and its refusal to make comparisons between societies. Anthropologists like Leslie White, Julian Steward, Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, and Marvin Harris began to develop a new evolutionary anthropology that corrected the problematic aspects of earlier efforts, such as the confusion of evolution with progress. Consequently, the rejection of social evolutionism has ebbed as the elements that made it unscientific have been separated from the more basic notions of patterned and directional change (Sanderson 1990).

There were three main problems with social evolutionary thinking that needed to be rectified:

1. Social evolution is easily confused with biological evolution, and yet these are largely distinct and different processes
2. Evolutionary thinking has tended to involve teleological assumptions in which the purposes of things have been asserted to be their cause
3. Evolution has been confused with the idea of progress—the notion that things are getting better

Sociocultural Evolution Versus Biological Evolution

Much confusion is generated by the failure to clearly distinguish between sociocultural evolution and biological evolution. Sociocultural evolution and biological evolution are different processes, though they share some similar characteristics. Failure to recognize the important differences often leads to theoretical reductionism in which social science is subsumed as a sub-branch of biology, and human behavior is seen as mainly determined by genetic inheritance. While biological evolution is based on the inheritance of genetic material, sociocultural evolution is based on the development of cultural inventions. Both genes and cultural codes are information storage devices by which the experiences and outcomes of one generation are passed on to future generations. Sociocultural evolution did not exist before the emergence of language. Animals that do not have the biological ability to manipulate symbols and to communicate them do not experience the processes of sociocultural evolution. The human animal is uniquely equipped to evolve socioculturally because of the presence of the relatively large unprepreprogrammed cortex of the human brain. This unusual piece of biological equipment makes possible the learning of complex linguistic codes and their infinite recombination.

Humans have a lot of RAM (random access memory) relative to ROM (read-only memory), whereas nonhuman animals have more ROM than RAM. In computers, RAM can contain changeable software, whereas ROM is permanently programmed at birth. This is another way of saying that humans are less instinctual than nonhumans. Ants and termites live in large and complex societies, but their behavior in these is largely instinctive. Their social structures are hardwired, and the architecture of their mounds is rigidly bound by the instinctive behaviors of mound building. Humans learn the cultural software that enables them to build large and complex societies, but the plans are coded in language and symbolic maps that may be modified without having to wait for the evolution of new instinctive behaviors. Language itself has a genetic basis, and this is why speakers of all natural languages share a somewhat similar grammatical structure. But this biological ability makes possible the great variation that we see in meaning systems and sociocultural institutions.

When early humans developed stone tools they did not need to genetically select for carnivorous teeth in order to become hunters. Thus, cultural evolution allowed humans to occupy new niches and to adapt in new ways without waiting for biological evolution. It has been thought that the advent of sociocultural evolution slowed down the rate of biological evolution of human genes, but there is some recent evidence that some aspects of the human genome may have changed rapidly under the influence of sociocultural evolution (e.g., Cochran and Harpending 2009).

There are other rather large and important differences between biological and sociocultural evolution: In biological evolution the source of innovations is mainly the random process of genetic mutation, while in sociocultural evolution recombinations and innovations occur both accidentally and intentionally as people try to solve problems. This is not to say that sociocultural evolution is entirely rational or even intentional, because many social changes occur as the unintended consequences of the actions of many individuals and groups. But the important point here is that, compared with genetic mutation, social innovation contains an important element of intentionality.

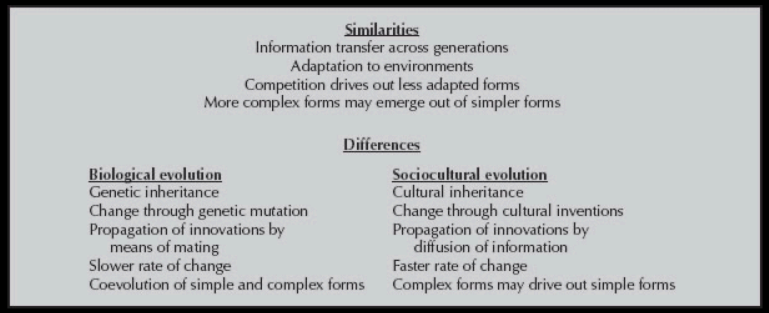
Another big difference is in the rate of change. Biological evolution of large species takes a long time, while sociocultural evolution is much faster and is accelerating. Biological evolution occurs slowly because it is

dependent on mating and reproduction and on those few unusual genetic mutations that are adaptive. Sociocultural evolution is accomplished by means of cultural inventions, and these can more easily spread from group to group. Societies can "mate" and exchange cultural code, whereas (complex) species cannot naturally exchange genetic information. Of course, advantageous genetic mutations can spread within a species and there may have been important interactions between biological and sociocultural evolution in the last ten millennia. But these are still rather different processes.

Another difference between biological and sociocultural evolution is in the relationship between simpler forms and more complex forms. In biological evolution, simple one-celled forms of life coevolve and thrive along with more complex multicelled organisms. Viruses and bacteria are doing just fine. In sociocultural evolution the situation is somewhat different. Larger and more complex societies tend to destroy or radically alter the cultures of small-scale societies. States and **empires** conquer and subjugate stateless societies (e.g., hunter-gatherer bands and horticultural villagers) by killing off their members and assimilating survivors into state-based societies. The plight of indigenous Americans since their incorporation into the Europe-centered world-system is an obvious example. Anthropologists have termed this the "law of cultural dominance." It is not a natural law in the sense that it is impossible for more powerful cultures to allow less powerful ones to survive. This said, there has been a good degree of coevolution as indigenous peoples have learned to cope with subordination in complex and hierarchical societies. Indigenes have recovered demographically and are reconstituting their cultures but as distinctive parts of a larger global culture.

Despite these contrasts, sociocultural evolution is not completely different from biological evolution: Both rely on information storage to pass the experiences of one generation on to another, both are mechanisms whereby individuals and groups adapt to changing environments or exploit new environments, and, in both, more adaptive changes drive out less adaptive characteristics through competition. And there is one more similarity. In both biological and sociocultural evolution, more complex systems can develop out of simpler systems (see Figure 1.2).

So sociocultural evolution and biological evolution are quite different processes, and it is important to understand this distinction because the word "evolution" is often used in ways that cause confusion. Many of the claims of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are exaggerations of the extent to which human actions are instinctive and based on biological evolution. While there is undoubtedly a biological basis of human behavior (as discussed above and in Chapter 3), the idea of human nature is itself a culturally constructed notion that has powerful effects in legitimating social institutions. And yet, to argue that human behavior is less instinctive than the behavior of other animals does not require that we deny the biological basis of human actions. There are clearly constraints, as well as possibilities, that emanate from our bowels and our brain stems. Sociocultural evolution has radically reconstructed the possibilities, and we are now entering a new age of recombinant DNA in which human decisions are radically altering the biological makeup of plants, animals, and ourselves. This is the culturalization of biology.



Similarities

Information transfer across generations
Adaptation to environments
Competition drives out less adapted forms
More complex forms may emerge out of simpler forms

Differences

Biological evolution	Sociocultural evolution
Genetic inheritance	Cultural inheritance
Change through genetic mutation	Change through cultural inventions
Propagation of innovations by means of mating	Propagation of innovations by diffusion of information
Slower rate of change	Faster rate of change
Coevolution of simple and complex forms	Complex forms may drive out simple forms

Figure 1.2 Summary of similarities and differences between sociocultural evolution and biological evolution

Regarding the relationship between biological evolution and social evolution, it is obvious that there would have been no cultural evolution if the human species had not developed the ability to speak and a brain capable of storing and reconfiguring complex codes and symbols. These were the key developments that allowed culture to emerge. Once culture emerged, it acted back upon biological evolution. Social structure has taken over as the main determinant of the ability of humans and other life forms to survive and prevail. Domestication and selective breeding of animals and plants as well as the cultural and social control of human reproduction have greatly affected biological evolution, and now the emergence of biotechnology (genetic surgery, cloning, and genetic engineering by means of gene-splicing) will transform a goodly portion of biological change into cultural evolution by adding intention and by allowing the radical diffusion of genetic material across different forms of life.

Teleology and Unilinear Evolution

Teleology is a form of explanation in which the purpose of a thing is alleged to be its cause. The most famous teleological explanation is that order in the universe is a consequence of the will of God. Aristotle contended that all of nature reflects the purposes of an immanent final cause. Regarding teleology and history, we think there is a structure to history and there are definite trends, but we do not claim there is an underlying purpose to history that is separate from the many purposes of the human historical actors. In the last chapter we argue that it will be possible in the future for the human species to take conscious control of its own collective evolution, but this is only a possibility.

The problem is that general purposes of the universe or of history cannot be scientifically demonstrated to exist. Science is limited to knowledge of proximate causation. The causes of an effect must be demonstrably present or absent in conjunction with the presence or absence of the thing to be causally explained. Proving causality requires temporal or spatial variation. General statements about characteristics of the universe that are invariably present cannot serve as scientifically knowable causes, because they do not vary. A scientific approach to sociocultural

evolution cannot assert final causes or ultimate purposes. It proposes causal explanations that are empirically testable and falsifiable with evidence about human history and social change.

Another unscientific characterization of historical processes is inevitabilism, or the idea that history is the result of an unfolding process in which stages follow one from another in a necessary order, like the pages of a book. Another term for this kind of theory is "unilinear evolution." Much of the rhetorical power of Marxism came from the stage theory of history that alleged that socialism and communism would inevitably supersede capitalism. Thus, hardworking revolutionaries could claim to have history on their side. Now, ironically, Marxism itself has been thrown into the dustbin of history, and the ideologues of neoliberal capitalism claim that socialism is an outdated and flawed ideology produced by the strains of the transition from traditional to modern society. All stage theories need to be treated with skepticism, but this does not mean we should abandon the effort to see the patterns of social change.

The probabilistic approach to social change adopted above disputes the scientific validity of inevitabilism. This is not the same as arguing that there are no directional patterns of social change or that all outcomes are equally probable. But it is important to know that scientific social change theory is about probabilities, not inevitabilities. Sociocultural evolution has not been a process in which a single society goes through a set of stages to arrive at the most developed point. It has been very uneven in space and time.

For example, when some hunter-gatherers (foragers)[1] began to practice horticulture, all foraging societies did not automatically switch over to horticulture. Hunters and farmers existed side by side, changing each other. So, too, when agrarian states emerged, all hunter-gatherers and village horticulturalists did not cease to exist. Agrarian empires and nomadic societies continued to interact and to mutually affect each other for thousands of years. Further, societies that were at the highest level of complexity at one point often collapsed in a later period, and the emergence of larger, more hierarchical, and more complex societies occurred elsewhere. This uneven pattern of development is one of the most important aspects of the evolution of world-systems.

In denying that social evolution is inevitable we argue for relative, rather than absolute, contingency. While conjunctural contingency and unexpected events can fundamentally alter the course of human history, they are not completely unconstrained. For instance, the fact that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were born in Europe at roughly the same time was an historical accident. But even if these friends and coworkers in the critique of capitalism had never known each other, the constraints of industrial capitalism on workers and the possibilities that capitalism creates for working-class opposition (e.g., being able to meet at the same place at the same time in factories) would very likely have generated a socialist movement.

The fate of the dinosaurs, destroyed by the impact of a large asteroid on the Yucatan Peninsula, powerfully reminds us of the potential importance of unexpected events. But what appears to us as a totally random and exogenous event on a human scale may be more systemic on a larger scale. In the case of asteroids, some astronomers claim that comets and their debris (asteroids) periodically cross the path of the earth, causing catastrophes that have repeatedly affected the evolution of life. Acknowledging contingency does not prevent us from searching out the more likely patterns of development in both the past and the future, or the trajectories that social change is likely to take in the absence of catastrophic random events.

Progress and Sociocultural Evolution

The "progress" theory of evolution that came out of the European Enlightenment claimed that whichever society came later in time must be better. Also, beginning in the 1960s, there developed a kind of reverse theory of progress that grew out of the Romantic Movement in Europe that we call "degeneration theory." This theory, whose major advocates are Paul Radin and Stanley Diamond, contends that earlier societies are superior to later societies. Many ecologists, anarchists, and neo-pagan feminists are advocates of degeneration theory.

Progress is not a scientific idea in itself, because it involves evaluations of the human condition that are necessarily matters of values and ethics. The idea that a world populated by humans is better than a world in which they are absent is an aesthetic or philosophical matter of choice. Even the ideas that warm and well-fed humans are better off than cold and hungry ones, and that long, healthy life is better than short disease-ridden existence are value choices, albeit ones that would be widely agreed upon by most people. When we turn to matters of religion, family form, cuisine, or the ideal degree of social equality, it is more obvious that we have entered the world of value decisions. One of the biggest problems with many theories of social evolution is that they have tended to be permeated with assumptions about what is better and worse, and many have simply assumed that evolution itself is a movement from worse to better. And with this powerful element embedded in them, evolutionary theories have served as potent justifications of conquest, domination, and exploitation. We have already pointed out that this was the main problem that led the second generation of anthropologists to reject social evolutionism in favor of a strong dose of cultural relativism.

The collapse of an agricultural state into a tribal village is often seen as a catastrophe. According to Tainter (1988, 193), "A complex society that has collapsed is suddenly smaller, simpler, less stratified and less socially differentiated. Specialization decreases and there is less social control. The flow of information drops, people trade and interact less ... population levels tend to drop." But how catastrophic this is must be determined on a case-by-case basis. Tainter argues that a popular version of this scenario is a war of all against all: The weak are victimized, physical strength determines who will rule, and survival is the only aim of those who are left. The notion that collapse is catastrophic is prominent among archaeologists, classicists, and historians as well.

The collapse of complex societies, Tainter (1988) claims, is often instigated by the lower classes. As a complex society continually deteriorates, some social sectors sense that the benefits of withdrawal or passive resistance outweigh the benefits of continued support. Collapse is more likely to be understood as catastrophic by those groups who are not primary food producers and who extract land, labor, and goods from the lower classes.

Theories of progress are still important ideological elements in the world of politics, and so ideas about social evolution are still susceptible to being used badly. But so are other products of science and humanistic endeavor. Physicists are painfully aware of how the knowledge they have produced has been turned into the threat of nuclear holocaust. Historians, even those who studiously avoid making generalizations about the human predicament, may find their interpretations of historical events turned to uses of which they disapprove. Neither scientists nor humanists can control the use to which their works are put.

This said, if we agree on a list of desirable ends that constitute our notion of human progress, then it can be a scientific question as to whether things have improved with respect to this list, or which kind of society does better

at producing the designated valuables. The list is one of preferences, not scientifically determinable but philosophically chosen. This list may be one's personal preferences or some collectively agreed-upon set of preferences. This approach to the problem of progress will be considered near the end of this book when we ask about the implications of our study of social change for world citizens.

The notion that it is plausible to formulate general theories of social evolution is given credence by the observation that many instances of parallel evolution have occurred. Parallel evolution means that similar developments have emerged under similar circumstances, but largely independently of one another. If horticulture (planting) had been invented only once and then had diffused from its single place of invention, it might be argued that this was merely a fortuitous accident. But horticulture was invented independently several times in regions far from one another. Similarly, states and empires emerged in both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres with little interaction between the two despite that the emergence of states in the Western Hemisphere occurred some three millennia later than in the Eastern Hemisphere. It is also quite likely that the emergence of states in East Asia, near the bend of the Yellow River in what is now China, occurred largely independently of the earlier emergence of states in Southwestern Asia, in the region that we call Mesopotamia (now Iraq). The significance of important instances of parallel social evolution is that they imply that general forces of social change are operating. Our task is to determine with evidence which conditions and tendencies were the most important causes of these developments.

Theories of Social Change

Theories of long-term social change differ from one another in two basic ways. One is the extent to which they posit qualitative as opposed to merely quantitative change. And the other is the extent to which they emphasize a single master variable that is allegedly the main cause of change.

Some theories posit a single logic of social change that is thought to adequately describe the important processes in all types of human societies and in all periods of time. Others argue that the logic of social change has itself altered qualitatively, and so a model that explains, for example, the emergence of horticulture is not adequate for explaining the emergence of capitalism. Those who see long-run continuities of developmental logic are called "continuationists," while those who posit the existence of fundamental reorganizations of the logic of social change are called "transformationists." Continuationists contend that similar processes of social change have operated for millennia, while transformationists see qualitative reorganizations of the processes of change as having occurred. The content of the models within each of these categories is quite variable depending on what sorts of social change are seen as most central or powerful—the master variables. It is also possible to combine these two alternatives, as we do below.

The master variables can be broadly categorized as either cultural or material, but within each of these two boxes there are several significant subtypes. Culturalists often emphasize the importance of the ways in which values are constructed in human societies, and so they focus on religion or the most central institutions that indicate the consensual and most powerful value commitments of a society. From this point of view the most important kind of social change involves redefinition of what is alleged to exist (ontology[2]) and changes in ideas about good and evil. Culturalists understand social evolution as the reorganization of socially institutionalized beliefs. For example, the

important changes in social evolution are understood to have been the transitions from the animistic philosophy of the hunter-gatherer band to the radical separation of the natural and supernatural realms in early states, to the rise of the "world religions,"[3] followed by the emergence of formal rationality and science. Culturalists see other social changes as consequences that follow from these most fundamental transformations of ideational culture.

Materialists focus primarily on the tangible problems that all human societies face and the inventions that people employ to solve these problems. They stress the fact that humans must eat and that in order for human groups to survive, they must provide enough food and shelter to allow babies to be born and to grow up. Thus, all human societies have demographic and economic needs, and the ways in which these requirements are met are important determinants of other aspects of social life. Materialists assert that human societies need to adapt to the natural environment and to the larger social environment in which they compete and cooperate with other human societies. They stress the importance of local and regional environmental and geographical factors in structuring human societies.

Materialists often differ as to which material problem is seen as most crucial and determinant. Some emphasize demographic and ecological constraints, while others focus on technologies of production or of power. Technologies of production are those techniques and practices by which resources are acquired or produced from the natural environment. Technologies of power are those institutions that create and sustain hierarchies within human societies and that allow some societies to conquer and dominate other societies.

Institutional Materialism

The theoretical approach that we employ is termed "institutional materialism," a synthetic combination of culturalist and materialist approaches. Institutional materialism explains human sociocultural evolution as an adaptive response to demographic, ecological, and economic forces in which people devise institutional inventions to solve emergent problems and to overcome constraints. Institutional inventions include ideological constructions such as religion as well as technologies of production and power. Technologies of production are such things as bows and arrows, the potter's wheel, and hydroelectric dams. Technologies of power are such things as secret societies, special bodies of armed men, and record-keeping methods of who has paid taxes, tithes, or tribute, as well as intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Solving problems at one level usually leads to the emergence of new problems, and so the basic constraints of societies are never permanently overcome, at least as of yet. Institutional materialism sees a geographical widening of the scale of ecological and social problems created by social evolution rather than a transcendence of material constraints. It also acknowledges the importance of environmental and geographical factors in both constraining and facilitating social change. This is what allows us to construct a single basic model (see Chapter 2) that represents the major material forces that have shaped social evolution over the last twelve millennia.

As mentioned above, institutions are inventions by people for solving problems. Many of the taken-for-granted aspects of our world are social institutions that have been constructed by people in the past. The most basic social institution of all is language. We all learn a language when we are children, a particular language with particular meanings and connotations. Our "mother tongues" are social constructions invented by people who spoke and

made meaning in the past, including those who raised us and those who taught them. Our particular languages are central institutions that heavily influence our understanding of what exists, what is possible, what is good, and what is evil. Other basic institutions that are historical inventions are money, the family (kinship), and productive technology.

Institutions in the sociological sense are more than just hospitals or schools. They include less tangible processes like verbal language and nonverbal codes such as gestures, styles of clothing, and the customs that govern everyday life. Institutional materialism analyzes the interactions between the material aspects and necessities of human life and the invention of culturally constructed institutions.

It is common to believe that whatever power social institutions have over us, they stop at the doorstep of our psyche (the personality or the self). After all, the psyche is our private business and ours to determine. At best, most of us will grant that our social institutions may interact with our psyche, but basically we have free will to make up our own minds and to form whatever identities we choose.

How do we imagine the relationship between social institutions and our psychological states—beliefs, memories, emotions, thinking processes, perceptions? It is tempting to imagine that we wear a mask to fulfill our social obligations. Our selves play the role of a good worker on the job, a good parent (or child) at home, a good drummer in our band, but these are only superficial outer layers that clothe our "real selves," which we are when we are alone. We think this view is mistaken.

Human societies contain many socializing influences. Some of these complement each other, but often they conflict. We import various combinations of these institutional forces, like mass media, school, and sports, inside us, and in the early years of life they dominate how we form our identities and how we think. As we grow older we do not transcend these influences to become a "real" individual. We become more critical about which social institutions we allow to influence our identity and our thinking, but our psychology is never really a private matter, nor is it mainly a product of our own action. The self is born in the crossfire between society and biology. Society does not just interact with our psyche; it forms and sustains it. This occurs in two ways: socialization and certification. Socialization involves a learning process in which the individual acquires skills and attitudes appropriate to social action. Certification is a process of socially sanctioned labeling in which the linguistic categories are learned and social initiation rites are performed to move the person from one socially defined position (status[4]) into another. Certification involves learning the socially prescribed definitions of positions such as dad, mom, uncle, checkout clerk, and so on. Then social identity bestowal rituals, such as passing a test, getting married, or graduating from college, are performed that locate persons in positions. Identity is conferred in socially legitimated rituals in which both the individual and important others agree that one has become, for example, a "doctor." In simple societies, initiation rituals make a girl into a woman, and a boy into a man. In rationalized societies this is organized as a series of steps that we call grades in school, but both the ritual certification and the socialization aspects are important elements of producing the self.

The process of socialization is learning skills, manipulating tools, learning how to take on roles, understanding and dealing with status hierarchies, and properly responding to situations. Only then can we sensibly participate in families, schools, hospitals, and grocery stores. Socialization can be understood as occurring in three stages. In the

first stage we are dependent on other people in a local face-to-face context. Our friends or parents hold the bicycle as we try to ride. If we want to learn to bake cookies, we may start out helping our dad in the kitchen, making them together and being assigned simple tasks. As these skills accumulate there comes a point when the cooperative social activity is mastered enough to be internalized. You can ride your bike or make cookies by yourself. The second stage involves internalization.

The third stage again involves cooperative activity with others, but now in an expanded way. You take the skills you have internalized and apply them to a wider social context than the original place you learned them. In the case of learning to bake cookies, you might be asked to participate in a neighborhood garage sale and be responsible for baking cookies for the sale. Now you must stretch your skills beyond what you originally learned. You must not only bake more cookies but consider making types of cookies that others may like even if you and your dad do not like them. This is called the global interpersonal stage.

The three stages of learning are local interpersonal, internalization, and global interpersonal. These stages originate in social institutions, are imported into the psychology of an individual, and hence return to larger social institutions. In stages one and two, individuals are the product of institutions; in stage three, institutions are coproduced by the actions of these individuals as we work in these institutions. As we shall see, the self, in the sense of our idea of our individual identity and how we think—how we take in information, explain, analyze, and evaluate—is an institution, too. Though individuals, in our view, do not have free will, they do have autonomy and agency. Autonomy means we sometimes make creative choices about how the three stages of learning occur. Agency means that we have some degree of choice in how we engage the institutions that form our being. Even dissent and counter-conformity are rooted in social institutions, except that these institutions are against the dominant institutions. Choice is a matter of which institutions you draw from and how you combine these influences. Thus, the self is self-constructed to some extent, but the raw materials are mainly those provided by society.

One type of social institution, social structure, is the main focus of the study of social change. Individuals are born and die, and so all societies are composed of structures in which individuals either reproduce institutions in much the way that they have been in the past or they alter these institutions. The easiest way of conceptualizing social structure is as an organizational chart in which the various positions that constitute the organization are shown along with their relationships with one another (see Figure 1.3).

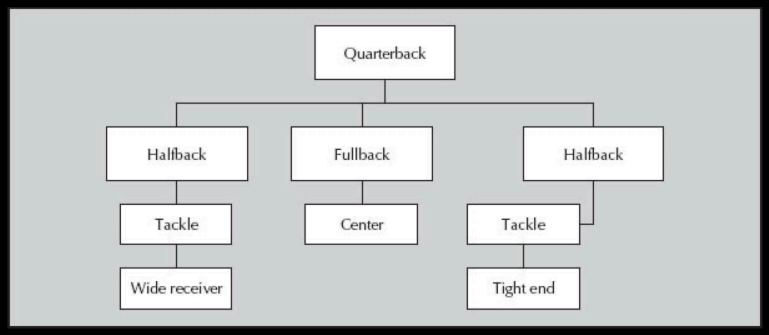


Figure 1.3 Social structure depicted as the organization chart of a football team

All formal organizations and bureaucracies are explicitly conceptualized as constellations of social positions (statuses) in which different individuals occupy the various positions. So a football team has a quarterback, a halfback, a center, and so on. Specific duties are assigned to these positions, and a particular player is evaluated in terms of how well or poorly he or she carries out the duties associated with the position. Sociologists point out that informal as well as formal groups may be viewed as having social structures. A group of friends having lunch may be understood as performing certain scripts appropriate to equals who care about one another, with a degree of improvisation thrown in to constitute genuineness and agency. All social groups are constituted in this way as organizations with rules and assumptions.

This structural view of human society focuses on the rules and definitions that provide the boundaries within which individuals carry out and reproduce social structures. But these structures also change, and the study of social change is, in large part, the effort to explain why structures change in the ways that they do.

Social structures are held together by three basic kinds of institutional "glue." Institutions that make human behavior somewhat predictable produce social order. In order to compete, fight, or cooperate with others, I need to be able to guess what they will do in reaction to what I do. The three basic types of social glue that facilitate relatively stable expectations about the behavior of others are as follows:

1. Normative regulation, in which people agree about the proper kinds of behavior
2. Coercive regulation, in which institutionalized sanctions are applied to discourage behavior that is considered inappropriate
3. Market regulation, in which individuals are expected to maximize their returns in competitive buying and selling

Normative regulation based on consensus about proper behavior is the original institution of social order. It requires a shared language and a good deal of consensus about basic values and proper behavior. Individuals learn

the rules and internalize them and regulate themselves and others with appeals to the moral order. This works well in small societies in which people interact with one another frequently and on a relatively egalitarian basis. It works less well (by itself) in larger societies that require that culturally different and spatially separated peoples cooperate with one another.

Coercive regulation (but not coercion) was invented with the rise of social hierarchies. Institutions such as the law do not require that each individual know or agree with the law. Thus, it works better for integrating communities that do not share common cultures and moral orders. Legal regulation is backed up by legitimate violence, the right of the lord or the king to enforce the law by means of punishment and prisons. Special bodies of armed men are used to enforce decisions made by states, as well as to engage in conflict with other societies. Courts are part of the institutionalization of coercion as an important form of social regulation.

Market regulation emerged with the invention of money and commodities. Market regulation, like institutionalized coercion, does have a basis in presumed norms, but these norms provide only the basic framework for interaction. They do not require agreement about much, except that money is useful. Markets articulate the actions of large numbers of buyers and sellers without requiring these players to identify with one another or even to agree about the general rules of legality. Markets are institutions that allow for relatively peaceful cooperation and competition among peoples who are spread over wide distances and who have rather different cultures.

Much of the sociology of roles, statuses, and social structures is based on the assumption that normative regulation is operating, but many social structures operate in the absence of much consensus because they are regulated by coercive or market institutions. The invention of these institutional forms of regulation has made organized social interaction possible on a greater and greater spatial scale, and now we have a single global network in which all three kinds of regulation play important parts. The story of how these inventions came about is the central focus of the study of sociocultural evolution.

The structuralist approach, which is an important part of institutional materialism, is not, contrary to what some critics have alleged, a necessarily deterministic approach to social life that eliminates the possibility of human freedom. Institutional structuralism allows us to understand the constraints that our own cultures have placed on us so that, to some degree, we can transcend these constraints. We see socially constructed institutions as human inventions that both empower us and constrain us in certain ways. The fact that the US government purchased, graded, and maintained a piece of property that is 3,000 miles long and 200 feet wide (I-70/I-80) makes it possible for me to drive from Baltimore to San Francisco in less than three days, while my great-grandparents took three months to make the same trip. This is technological and institutional empowerment. But the same interstate highway system means that the United States has invested a huge amount of money, energy, property, and human labor into a particular kind of transportation network that might become obsolete due to some future change in technology or in the cost of energy.

The canals of Venice and Amsterdam represent sunk costs that could not easily be reconstructed when transportation technology changed. Our religions, the ways in which we have defined male-and femaleness, the huge psychic investments in nationalistic sentiments, the expensive rituals by which we demonstrate our commitments to some people and our enmities to others—all these institutionalized aspects of our society make it

possible for us to do some things, and very difficult to do others. This is both empowerment and structural alienation. The analysis of institutional structures makes it possible to understand how our history has constructed us and what we may need to do to reconstruct the future.

Institutional materialism is a synthetic theoretical focus that draws from several social science disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, demography, and geography. This will be combined with social geography as it has emerged from the comparative world-systems perspective, the main topic of the next chapter. These tools will help us see the broad patterns as well as the unique aspects of different kinds of societies in the processes of social change.

Suggested Readings

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Notes

[1] Hunter-gatherers are also called foragers because they scour natural territories to harvest the products of nature rather than modifying nature to increase its productivity. This is very land-intensive because it takes a lot of unmodified nature to support each person. Some hunter-gatherers, especially those who are relatively sedentary and live in permanently established seasonal villages, engage in "proto-agriculture"-the modification of natural landscapes either to increase their productivity through the use of fire in a way that encourages edible plants to grow or to increase grazing areas for deer populations. We use the terms "hunter-gatherer" and "forager" interchangeably.

[2] Ontology is the philosophy of being, or the assumptions that are made about existence or reality. All cultures contain beliefs about what exists.

[3] **World religions** are those in which the moral community of believers is constituted as individuals who have chosen and affirmed their belief in the deity, for example, Christianity and Islam. In principle you are not born into the religion, as with ethnically based religions. This separates membership from kinship or ethnicity and makes possible a transethnic community of believers.

[4] In sociology, the word "status" means two different things. Most commonly it is a synonym for prestige or social honor. The other meaning is a position in a social structure with associated role expectations. This second meaning

is the one we are using here.