

C.2. Anthropological Evolutionary Theories

During the late 1800s many anthropologists promoted their own models of social and biological evolution. Their writings portrayed people of European descent as biologically and culturally superior to all other peoples. The most influential anthropological presentation of this viewpoint appeared in *Ancient Society*, published in 1877 by American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan.

Morgan argued that European civilization was the pinnacle of human evolutionary progress, representing humanity's highest biological, moral, and technological achievement. According to Morgan, human societies had evolved to civilization through earlier conditions, or stages, which he called Savagery and Barbarism. Morgan believed these stages occurred over many thousands of years and compared them to geological ages. But Morgan attributed cultural evolution to moral and mental improvements, which he proposed were, in turn, related to improvements in the ways that people produced food and to increases in brain size.

Morgan also examined the material basis of cultural development. He believed that under Savagery and Barbarism people owned property communally, as groups. Civilizations and political states, he said, developed together with the private ownership of property. States thus protected people's rights to own property. Morgan's theories coincided

with and influenced those of German political theorists Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Engels and Marx, using a model like Morgan's, predicted the demise of state-supported capitalism. They saw communism, a new political and economic system based on the ideals of communality, as the next evolutionary stage for human society.

Like Morgan, Sir Edward Tylor, a founder of British anthropology, also promoted the theories of cultural evolution in the late 1800s. Tylor attempted to describe the development of particular kinds of customs and beliefs found across many cultures. For example, he proposed a sequence of stages for the evolution of religion—from animism (the belief in spirits), through polytheism (the belief in many gods), to monotheism (the belief in one god).

In 1871 Tylor also wrote a still widely quoted definition of culture, describing it as “that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.” This definition formed the basis for the modern anthropological concept of culture.