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# UNIT 1 CLASSICAL THEORIES

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## Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the:

- classical theories;
- followers of the theories and their approach to the study of human beings; and
- criticisms that have followed these theories.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Distant land, society, cultures, customs, rituals etc have always fascinated humankind as they wanted to know how these came into existence and how they differ from their own society. In the works of ancient travelers and historians like Heun Sung, these aspects have been reflected long before Anthropology came up as a subject. Herodotus (c.484-425 BC) a historian mainly remembered for his history of the Persian wars wrote detailed accounts of his travels. These early works, although they contained reflections on society could not be completely termed as anthropological. Works which focused on human beings and their society basically belonged to two genres: travelers writing their travel accounts and social philosophers propounding their theories. Eriksen (2008) has rightly stated that it is only when travel accounts (data) and philosophical thinking (theory) is integrated, Anthropology as a subject emerges.

In this Unit the discussion would pertain to some of the works before anthropology emerged as a theory and then move on to the theories that were being postulated when Anthropology was emerging as a subject. These theories have been termed as classical theories as they reflect the era of enlightenment and antiquity. In spite

of the criticism these theories have generated, they are an integral part of Anthropology as they present the perspectives of the early anthropologists who had envisaged the discipline. Theories of Evolutionism, Diffusionism and Historical Particularism are some of the classical theories that are being discussed herein.

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## 1.2 EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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In the early years of anthropology, the focus revolved around evolution-centering on the origin and diversification of human culture and society. These theories focused mainly on evolution of family, marriage, kinship and religion as these were seen as the basic institutions common to all societies. During this era, most of the eminent works by lawyers and sociologists were comparative analogs using the data available from the societies to which Europe was getting exposed as a result of trade and colonisation.

### 1.2.1 Early Evolutionists

In the 1700 Scottish thinkers like Adam Ferguson, John Miller, and Adam Smith reflected that all societies pass through four stages: (i) hunting and gathering, (ii) pastoralism and nomadism, (iii) agricultural, and finally (iv) commerce. The Scottish thinkers based their theories of social evolution on the experiences of the union of Scotland with England in 1707 and the effect it had on its trade. In 1748, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) published *De l' esprit des loix* (The Spirit of Laws) a comparative cross cultural study of legislative systems. Montesquieu looked at legal system as an aspect of the wider social system, closely intertwined with other facets of the society like politics, economy, kinship, family, religion etc. Montesquieu collected some of the data first hand and supplemented them with second hand knowledge. He gave the classification of the different stages of the society- Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation, later followed by anthropologists like Morgan and Tylor.

The early works were mostly postulated by lawyers such as J.J. Bachofen, Sir Henry Maine, and McLennan. These early works have already been discussed in depth in Block 1, Unit 2 Philosophical and Historical Foundations of Social Anthropology, hence we would just recapitulate herein and not discuss in depth. J.J. Bachofen's contribution lies towards the advocacy of mother right. In his work *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother Right, 1861), Bachofen associated the rule of women during the early stages of the development of society which later gave way to Father right. Sir Henry Maine in his major work *Ancient Law*, (1861) established that the laws of the people are integrated with the social heritage particular to a society and negated the laws of universalism which was being postulated during the time. Maine based his work on the ancient legal systems of Rome, Islamic law and the Brahmanical laws. Patriarchy as the norm of society was relected in Maine's work as opposed to Bachofen's Mother right written during the same time. While on the other hand McLennan based his work on marriage and his work *Primitive Marriage*, (1865) accentuated Bachofen's view on mother right.

### 1.2.2 Contributors to the Theory of Evolution: Major Anthropological Works

Herbert Spencer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century postulated the theory of **cosmic evolution**. His theory showed the progress of societies over time which was accomplished through competition. The phrase "**survival of the fittest**" owes its origin in the

writings of Spencer, who emphasised on the process of social selection by which only those individuals who have merit come up in society. He was against the notions of social benefits to be given to the poor. His works were developed and published several years earlier to Charles Darwin's work on biological evolution *Origin of Species* (1856).

In 1890 Sir James Frazer published his voluminous work *Golden Bough* on the study of magic and religion in which he gave a detailed description of religious beliefs of societies and cultures from various parts of the globe. The initial volume majorly revolved round the customs pertaining to an ancient Italian priesthood where each priest of the shrine is ritually murdered by his successor. In the later volumes he added data from across the globe, these accounts were mostly based on travelogues and oral stories collected from travelers.

Lewis Henry Morgan regarded as the father of American Anthropology lived among the Iroquois for sometime during the year 1840. He was adopted by one of the Iroquois clans and named *Tayadaowuhkuh* 'he who builds bridges' (Eriksen, 2008). During the stay, Morgan developed an interest in kinship and later carried on a comparative study of Native American Kinship. Morgan introduced the distinction between **classificatory** and **descriptive** kinship which is in use till date. In his work *Ancient Society* (1877) keeping in line with the evolutionary stages of the society as propagated by Montesquieu—Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation, Morgan explained the changing dimension by introducing three sub-stages each for savagery and barbarism. Morgan tried to link the shift from one stage to the other through technological shifts like the use of fire, bow, and pottery in the savage period, moving on to domestication of animals, agriculture, metal working during the barbarian stage and to alphabet and writing in the civilisation era. Thus, Morgan attributed technological progress as the source behind social progress and change. In other words, if a change occurs for example in social institutions, organisations or ideologies, its root can be traced to a technological change in the society. Morgan's theories were popularised by Friedrich Engels, who had used some of Morgan's theories in his famous work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). For further reading in Engels and other Marxists followers of Marxist theory refer to Block 4 Unit 3 of this Course. Morgan's theory was important as it supported the conviction that materialistic factors—economic and technological—are decisive in shaping the fate of humanity.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Anthropology was getting established as a discipline Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's worked on the theory of evolution of culture. Sir Edward Burnett Tylor was the first British Professor of Anthropology, at the University of Oxford (1896). His work *Primitive Culture* (1871) defined Culture which till date is regarded as the most complete definition of culture.

"Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."(Tylor 1958[1871]:1)

Tylor proposed the theory of **unilinear universal evolution** of society which stated that culture evolved from simple to complex. He further maintained that all societies passed through the three stages of development as suggested by Monstequiue – savagery to barbarism to civilisation. During this period Europe had explored, conquered and colonised most of the countries across the globe. Tylor's theory thus, had a strong foothold, as examples from these colonised areas

showed the various stages of evolution. Based on the principle of *psychic unity of mankind*, Tylor explained the **parallel evolutionary stages** in different cultures.

#### Reflection

***Psychic Unity of Mankind:*** The theory was based on the belief that human beings are born with similar psychological/mental capabilities that had the same thought process, so it would progress in the same line. Spencer's theory of social evolution and survival of the fittest was accentuated by Tylor's theory of cultural survivals.

***Cultural Survivals:*** Tylor explained survivals as those processes, customs, and opinions, which by compulsion of habit are carried forward into a new realm of society, and they thus continue as living examples of an earlier condition of a culture which at present has evolved into a new one.

### 1.2.3 Criticisms

The theory of social evolutionism was denounced by the anthropologists of the modern and post modern era.

- The followers of the social evolution theory were referred to as “Arm Chair Anthropologists” by the next generation of anthropologists who emphasised on primary data collection through field work. Sir James Frazer's work *Golden Bough* is set as an example by the later anthropologists of arm chair writing as the work was entirely based on secondary data. Frazer had never conducted fieldwork nor had any direct interaction with the people under study.
- Anthropologists like Franz Boas, Margret Mead and others of the American School disapproved of the theory of universal evolution based on psychic unity of mankind as it failed to take into account the cultural variations. Herein, Morgan's theory of evolution based on technological progress came under the scanner as the examples from the Polynesian chiefdoms, showed complex political systems, but with no trace of pottery (Eriksen, 2008).
- The comparative method used for these theories merely used the encounter with the other societies to enhance the greatness of the anthropologist's own society. As the reference point was the Civilisation of the Whites, these theories have been condemned as ethnocentric.

### 1.2.4 Neo Evolutionism

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists like Leslie White and Julian H. Steward attempted to overcome the failings of the classical evolutionary theorists by incorporating the methodology of empiricism and also trying to develop rational criteria of measuring evolution. They felt that evolution was a real fact and societies become more complex over time. According to Leslie White, Tylor was correct in every respect except for his methodology. For Leslie White ‘energy’ was the key component which human beings learned to harness in the course of cultural evolution. From the earlier stages when human beings started to harness energy from the natural resources like water, air and fire, slowly moving towards domestication of animals and plants, to the invention of the wheel Leslie White showed how energy conversion spurred cultural evolution. However Leslie White gave too much emphasis on the material dimensions of life which was later criticised by Marshall Sahlins.

Sahlins and Service gave a dual theory of evolution in which they distinguished between general and specific evolution. The former refers to the overall process of evolution of societies and the latter to the regional and local adaptations of

specific societies. The process of general evolution used the concept of adaptability as against adaptation. Some traits give to some societies an evolutionary advantage and they are able to spread across the globe in the process of adaptive radiation. This adaptive radiation is not necessarily a positive process and often involves war and violence. Sahlins cites the example of the discovery of gun powder that enabled European societies to establish control over most parts of the world and lead to a process of social evolution we today recognise as modernisation.

Julian Steward modified the concept of culture to divide culture into two parts, a culture comprising of the techno-economic systems that directly interact with the environment and a peripheral culture that grows by historical and specific conditions of existence of the culture. The relationship between the culture core and the environment is both functional and dialectical and establishes the methodology of cultural ecology.

The specific relationships of core and environment are conditioned by the nature of the environment and while they establish the direction of evolution of cultures, they are not universal but follow a multilinear pattern in which each environmental zone could be expected to have its own mode of evolution and one could generalise across similar environmental zones.

The peripheral culture on the other hand gives to each culture its unique character. Thus while the culture core of all societies having say, a hunting food gathering way of life, will be expectedly similar, their peripheral culture like language, art etc. can be different. The followers of neo-evolutionism also took into account seasonal migration while acknowledging the similarities between cultures. The theory of diffusionism also took into account migration which would be taken up in detail in the next section.

### 1.3 DIFFUSIONISM

Diffusionism theory interpreted the growth of culture in terms of “cultural similarities”, “mutual contact”, “cultural cradle”, “culture area”, “*kulturkreise*” (culture circle). Diffusionists negated the principle of Unilinear Evolution and studied geographical distribution and migration of cultural traits, and reflected that cultures are patch work of traits interwoven with numerous histories and origins. According to diffusionists, various culture complexes develop at various times in different parts of the world and later on diffuse to other parts of the world mainly due to migration. They thus, opined that culture has grown in course of history not because of evolution, but because of transmission of culture due to migration and mutual contact.

#### Reflection

**Culture Trait:** The simplest basic unit into which a culture can be analysed. Such a trait is a specific entity within the culture. A combination of traits is a culture complex. A trait may be diffused independently and may join freely with other traits. (Tylor: 540, 1991)

**Culture Complex:** An organically related group of culture traits in a culture area, e.g., the cattle complex of East African cultures. In diffusion (q.v), the traits of a culture complex will probably remain associated. The traits are usually logically associated with each other. (Tylor: 125. 1991)

**Culture Area:** A region which has a relatively similar way of living common to its component socio-economic systems and cultures. The centre of the culture area has uniform customs but its periphery may be less homogeneous. The concept is more relevant to material culture than to other aspects of culture. (Tylor: 37, 1991)

In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century three main schools of thoughts evolved to study diffusion;

- a) British Diffusionist School
- b) German Diffusionist School
- c) American Diffusionist School

### 1.3.1 British Diffusionist School

The British Diffusionist School mainly talked about ancient Egypt as the cultural cradle of the world. Also known as heliocentric diffusion, the theory was based on the conviction that culture originated from one culture centre. The most prominent British “diffusionists” were Grafton Elliot Smith, W.H.R. Rivers and William James Perry.

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) the pioneer of the British School advocated that culture first evolved in Egypt and had spread to the far corners of the world from about 4000 B.C. He and Perry believed that cultural development had begun about 6000 years ago. Smith (1928:22) stated that prior to that time, the earth was inhabited by “Natural Man” who were nomads and lacked domestication of animals, agriculture, houses, clothing, but religion, social organisation, hereditary chiefs and formal laws or ceremonies of marriage or burial. In approximately 4000 B.C the inhabitants of the Nile Valley “appreciated the fortunate chance provided them by a “natural crop” of barley and adopted a settled mode of life (ibid: 32). Thus, following the matrix of evolution the Egyptians according to Smith invented pottery, basketry, building houses; started domestication of animals; built towns and learned to bury their dead in cemeteries and began the worship of deity. Having accomplished their own civilisation, they set out to explore the world, and in so doing the Egyptians rapidly spread through diffusion and colonisation. Smith correlated similarities between Egyptian complex of large stone monuments related to the sun worship and that of Megaliths of England such as stone hedge. Thus, arriving at the conclusion that megalithic monuments of England were crude imitations of Egyptian pyramids and mastabas, as a case of migration, he first published his views in an article in 1911. Later he studied Maya pyramids, Japanese Pagodas, Cambodian and Balinese Temples and American burial mounds. Smith published his Pan-Egyptian theory of diffusion in the book entitled *Origin of Civilisation* published in 1928.

W.J. Perry (1887-1949) was an adherent follower of the theory postulated by Smith, he strengthened the hands of Smith in formulating the school though there was no specific theoretical contribution on his part. His books *The Children of the Sun* (1923) and *Gods and the Men* (1927) were the major contributions to the British school of diffusionism which firmly established Egypt as the centre of civilisation.

W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) *The History of the Melanesian Society* published in 1914 leaned heavily on the theory of degeneration. He sought the explanation of contrasts among Melanesian and Polynesian cultures in terms of original complexes which had allegedly been spread by successive waves of migration. Herein, he explained the role of migration, assimilation and acculturation, based on assumption of how boatloads of men migrated to these islands and married local women and assimilated with the islanders, barring their original burial rituals. W.H.R. Rivers was of the opinion that the similarities in cultures could be explained by closely examining the patterns of imitation and migration. Thus, his summation was

in line with the theory of un-inventiveness put forward by his contemporaries Smith and Perry.

### Criticisms

- a) Egypt as the only epicenter of all invention was the greatest flaw that led other anthropologists to denounce this school as extreme diffusionists.
- b) Hypothetical assumption of human beings as un-inventive to explain Egypt as the only centre of invention was not acceptable to the later anthropologists.
- c) Only simple form of diffusion i.e diffusion of culture traits was taken into account while diffusion of culture complex was not emphasised.
- d) Material culture was predominantly explained while non-material aspects of culture were not taken into account.

The British School of Diffusionism was the last one among the three schools to emerge and the first one to disappear.

### 1.3.2 German Diffusionist School

The scholars of the German Diffusionist School were of the opinion that culture traits and complexes emerged independently in many areas and then dispersed to other parts of the world. 'Kulturkries' or Culture-Circle school of thought as it is known, differs from the British school of diffusionism in its basic concept of origin of culture. *Kulturkries* School attributed development of cultures not to one particular place but to several places at several different times. Culture traits and culture complexes were believed to have originated independently at several parts of the world from where it was imitated and diffused to other places due to migration. Thus, according to the German Diffusionist School each culture trait or culture complex had a circle or district leading to the concept of culture circles. Thus, we see that the German School of Diffusion did not completely negate the theory of evolution. The roots of the *Kulturkries* School can be traced to the founder of anthrogeography Friedrich Ratzel.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Leo Frobrnius (1873-1938), Fritz Graebner (1877-1934) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) the herbingers of the German Diffusionist School had followed in the lines of the propogators of the theory of evolution emphasising the uniqueness of each cultural heritage. While at the same time argued that cultural evolution was not unilineal thereby denouncing Tylor's psychic unity of mankind and reflected that technological development alone cannot judge the complexity of a particular culture. The diffusionist aimed at a comprehensive survey of the spread of cultural traits from the earliest times. In this regard Ratzel using the comparative method traced the similarities of the bow and arrow in his work *The History of Mankind* (1896). He studied the similarities in the cross section of the bow shaft, the material and fastening of the bow string and the feathering of the arrow of different societies. Based on the study Ratzel concluded that the bow and arrow of Indonesia and West Africa were related. Using the same technique Ratzel's pupil Leo Frobrnius widened the spectrum of the material culture to masks, houses, drums, clothings and shields to present similarities between Melanesia, Indonesia and West Africa.

Fritz Graebner who was a museum curator in Germany worked on the culture circle and culture strata in Oceania and Africa and further developed the idea and tried to give it a global perspective. In his famous book *Methodder Ethnology*

**Anthropological Theories-I** (1911) he tried to explain the criteria for identifying affinities and chronologies or similarities and historical relationships. Based on the reconstruction of chronology Graebner could identify as many as six historically similar cultural developments which had counterparts in other parts of the world.

- i) Tasmanian culture
- ii) Australian boomerang culture
- iii) Totemic Hunter culture
- iv) Two-class horticulturist culture
- v) Melanesian bow culture and
- vi) Polynesian Patrilineal culture

Father Wilhelm Schmidt born in Australia was a self proclaimed follower of Graebner. To understand the cultures of the world, both Graebner and Schmidt applied two rules as discussed below and divided the world into different strata and circles (Upadhyay & Pandey: 109).

- i) Criteria of Form as called by Graebner and Criteria of Quality as stated by Schmidt reflected that similarities between two culture elements which do not automatically arise out of nature, material purpose of traits or objects, should be interpreted as a result of diffusion irrespective of the distance that might separate the two instances.
- ii) Criteria of Quantity stated that the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional articles/items/artifacts showing similarities increases.

Schmidt distinguished four major grades of culture circles which are till date referred to;

- i) Primitive culture circle
- ii) Primary culture circle
- iii) Secondary culture circle
- iv) Tertiary culture circle

### **Criticisms of the German Diffusionist School**

- Diffusionist school focused on what is diffusion but never explained the causes of diffusion and how it takes place. The methodology did not take into account the dynamics of culture change.
- Despite the identification of 4-5 bands with their own migration patterns being reflected upon yet nothing concrete on culture circles could be established.
- Diffusionist school also relied heavily on the museum methodologies. The main component of this school was thus, typology of culture traits rather than on the explanation of the causes of spread of diffusion.

### **1.3.3 American Diffusionist School**

The American School of Diffusionism picked up the threads of the German School of Diffusionism and tried to explain the causes of the spread of diffusion. The



founder of this school was Franz Boas (1858-1942) who was followed by Clark Wissler (1870-1947) and Albert L Kroeber (1876-1960). The culture area approach was a significant part of this school while trying to map and classify the tribal groups of North and South America and show the diffusion of culture traits and complexes.

Diffusion as a cause for similar traits was explained by the American school as a result of adaptation and migration. Thus, the culture area approach was used to show the diffusion of traits among different tribes. The American school divided the world into different culture areas on the basis of geographical regions. This in turn led to the listing of traits found in the cultures. The list consisted of traits which might have been either adapted or migrated due to diffusion. This concept was emphasised by Wissler while Kroeber, Herskovits and Sapir supported the approach. Clark Wissler took into account the historical questions and his biggest contribution was the *age-area hypothesis*. In an age where radio carbon dating was yet to appear on the scene, it was difficult to ascertain the real age of the artifacts. Clark at such a juncture came up with the age area hypothesis that assumed that culture traits tended to spread from the centre towards the periphery of any culture area. This was also known as the ‘law of diffusion’.

Melville Herskovits during this era gave the explanation of ‘culture trait’ and ‘culture complex’ through his work which is best known as the “Cattle Complex of East Africa”. While Kroeber’s contribution was immensely seen towards the theory by listing and generating long list of culture traits. For any particular culture trait like hunting or fishing, the list ran to many thousands of similar culture traits across the globe. Franz Boas in following this approach had taken into account the psychic bases of human beings and thus, the American School did not discard the theory of Psychic Unity as postulated by the Evolutionist School though it also took into account the historical aspects. This shift led to the rise of the School of Historical Particularism.

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## 1.4 SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM

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Franz Boas the founder of the School of Historical Particularism believed that grand theories of socio-political evolution or diffusion were not provable. He was of the notion that the theories of all societies as a part of one single human culture evolving towards a cultural pinnacle were flawed, especially those that promoted a western model of civilisation as the apex of cultural achievement. Boas also had reservations in accepting the theories of multilinear evolution of societies. He argued that many cultures developed independently, each based on its own particular set of circumstances such as geography, climate, resources and particular cultural borrowing. Based on this argument, he postulated reconstructing the history of individual cultures, through in-depth investigation that compares group of culture traits in specific geographical areas. The distribution of the culture traits in a specific area were then plotted and further cultural borrowings determined. This gives consent to the reconstruction of individual histories of specific cultures and allows the investigator to draw conclusions as to which cultural elements were borrowed and which were developed individually. Through historical particularism Franz Boas emphasised on the reconstruction of each individual culture to understand the underlying intricacies and intrinsic value of each culture. Boas theory was carried forward and developed by his contemporary scholars and students which include Alfred L. Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Robert Lowie, Paul Radin and Edward Sapir. The theory was also borrowed by the anthropologists working in the

**Anthropological Theories-I** archaeological field as it comprised in-depth study of what had happened in the past.

### **Criticisms**

The main criticism in Historical Partucularism arose because of the heavy concentration of the data collection of the past.

- The ethnographers stated that the huge amount of data collected is difficult for a investigator to sythesize.
- Moreover, the upcoming generations of anthropologists were more interested in studying the cultural process of the present rather than the past.

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## **1.5 SUMMARY**

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The classical theories have their own place of pride in the study of Social Anthropology. These theories were the starting point from which the emphasis on theorising a particular event came up. Though these theories are no longer of prime importance yet they built the foundation for the anthropological thoughts. These theories brings into focus the society of the victorian era and with the passage of time the anthropologists have move forward from the speculation on evolution and the spread of culture (diffusion) to the more relative aspects in the present era. Herein, we have seen that the history of anthropological theories has involved transistion from diachronic perspective to synchronic perspective, which further moved on to interactive perspective. The theories following the classical theories would be taken up in the upcoming units of this block. Hereafter the theory of Functionalism, Structural Functionalism and Neo-Functionalism is going to be discussed.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Critically discuss the theory of evolution in social anthropology?
- 2) What is the theory of Diffusionism?
- 3) Discuss the British School of Diffusionism.
- 4) Discuss the German School of Diffusionism.
- 5) Analyse the American School of Diffusionism.
- 6) Delineate the theory of Historical Particularism.