

Sociocultural Evolution



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Sociocultural Evolution

Sociocultural materialism is an avowedly evolutionary perspective.

Sociocultural Evolution

“Anthropologists have long recognized that in Broadest perspective cultural evolution has three main characteristics: Escalating energy budgets, increased productivity and accelerating population growth.” --Marvin Harris

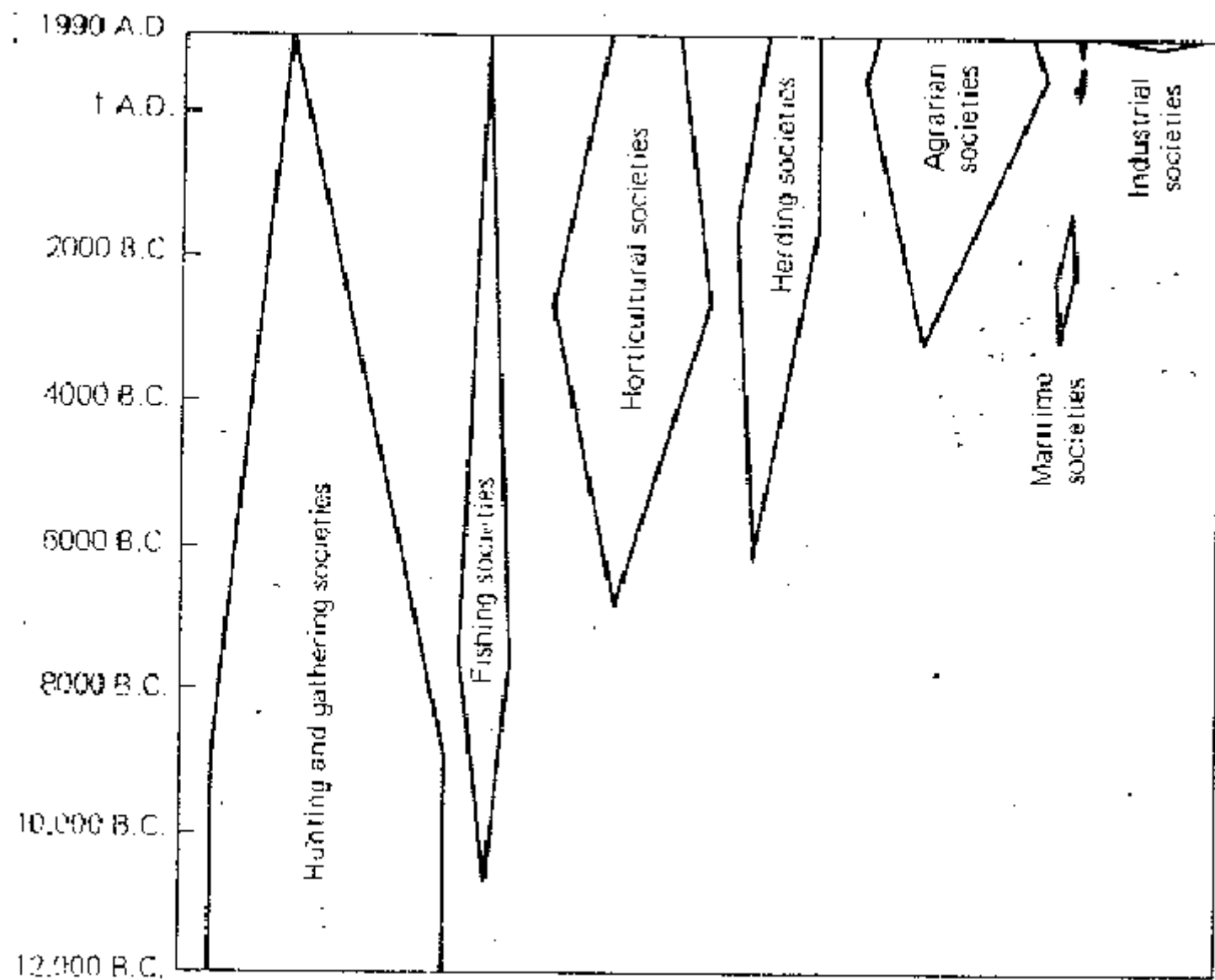


FIGURE 1.1 Societal change from 12,000 B.C. to the present

Sociocultural Evolution

Great transitions in human societies, transitions that involve a qualitative shift in the mode of production, are an outgrowth of the intensification process.

Evolutionary Process:

- Intensification
- depletion and pollution
- Further intensification
- depletion and pollution

Evolutionary Process:

The whole process results in either the collapse of the system or a shift to a new mode of production where the process begins again.

Intensification

Throughout history, the intensification of the forces of production have always been toward greater complexity because the process leads to the exploitation of less available, harder to reach sources of energy.

Intensification

Similarly, when environmental depletion is reached, the qualitative shift in the forces of production represents a move from a readily available source (say wood) to a less accessible source (coal, oil or nuclear fission).

Intensification

Over the course of social evolution, mankind has had to engage in more and more complicated processing and production techniques in order to draw energy out of the environment.

Intensification

When societies increase productivity, food becomes more available, thus more children are born and survive infancy.

Intensification

Increases in food invariably increase population growth, thus bringing population level up to the new environmental limits.

Evolutionary Process:

This increasing complexity of the mode of production, as well as the relatively large population that this new technology is able to sustain, has impact of the structure of sociocultural systems.

Evolution of Structure

- Bureaucratization
- Decline in primary groups

Characteristics of Bureaucracy

- division of labor;
- hierarchy of authority
- written rules
- impersonality
- expertise based on achievement
- efficiency

Bureaucratization

- Bureaucracy can best be understood as a process.
- The process refers to the changes within organizations toward greater rationality, that is, improved operating efficiency and more effective attainment of common goals.

Bureaucratization

Pervades nearly all aspects of modern life including government (all levels), corporations, education, sports, and even crime.

Causes of bureaucratization:

- intensification
- decline of primary groups
- organizational imperative
- rationalization of superstructure

Superstructural Evolution

Such superstructural norms and values as individualism, efficiency, calculability, and materialism have been encouraged by the bureaucratization process.

Superstructural Evolution

Increasingly, human behavior is guided by observation, experiment, and reason to master the natural and social environment to achieve a desired end.

Consequences of Superstructural Evolution

- Irrationality
- Alienation
- anomie
- Rising rates of deviance
- a rise of individualism

Alienation

Alienation refers to the sense of powerlessness, isolation, and meaninglessness experienced by human beings when they are confronted with social institutions and conditions that they cannot control or consider oppressive.

Alienation

- Government
- Community
- Religion
- Self

Alienation

While Marx applied this concept to many social institutions, he considered economic institutions as the most important.

Irrationality Factor

Ultimately, rationalization involves dehumanization--the elimination of concern for human values, traditions and emotions.

Causes of Irrationality

- Division of labor
- Bureaucracy
- Decline of primary groups
- Rationalization

Irrationality Factor

- The result is a seeming paradox-- bureaucracies, the epitome of rational behavior, acting in very irrational ways.
- Economic bureaucracies in pursuit of profit that deplete and pollute the environment upon which they are based.

Irrationality Factor

- Political bureaucracies, set up to protect civil liberties, violate them with impunity.
- This is called the irrationality of zweckrational--or the irrationality factor.

Summary of Social Evolution

- Intensification
- Bureaucratization
- Rationalization

Intensification

The application of science, logic and reason (zweckrational) to problems of regulating the flow of energy from the environment.

Bureaucratization

The application of science (including social science) logic, and reason (zweckrational) to problems of human organization.

Rationalization

The increasing dominance of zweckrational (science, logic, reason) over behavior motivated by tradition, values, and emotions.

General Rationalization

The evolutionary process by which the sociocultural system (infrastructure, structure, and superstructure) is increasingly dominated by science, logic, observation, and reason.

General Rationalization

WEBER'S GENERAL THEORY OF RATIONALIZATION (OF WHICH BUREAUCRATIZATION IS ONLY A PARTICULAR CASE) REFERS TO INCREASING HUMAN MASTERY OVER THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS.

General Rationalization

THE ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR THIS MASTERY ARE THOSE OF OBSERVATION, EXPERIMENT AND REASON (ZWECK).

General Rationalization

Intensification of the infrastructure can be interpreted as the growing application of goal oriented rational behavior to regulate the flow of energy from the environment--and thus another form of the rationalization process itself.

General Rationalization

The intensification of production has led to the greater complexity of production processes to exploit a depleting/polluting environment. The distinguishing characteristic of the changing mode of production is not one of growth but of rationalization.

General Rationalization

While the rationalization of the reproductive process throughout most of human history led to the growth of population--both to satisfy the structural interests of hierarchies and the bio--psychological needs of the people--an advanced industrial society has somewhat different interests and needs.

General Rationalization

Growth of population in advanced industrial societies has stopped, but the sociocultural practices used to achieve this stability, as well as the changing feedback loops of structure and superstructure, are clearly consistent with rationalization.

Sociocultural Evolution

As the industrial mode of production intensifies, the rationalization of social and personal life continues apace.

Sociocultural Evolution

Finally, it should be emphasized that the relationships between various components of the system are dynamic. The rationalization of superstructure provides positive feedback for the further bureaucratization of structure, both of which provide positive feedback for the further intensification of infrastructure.

Sociocultural Evolution

There is a dynamic relationship between human beings and society. We are both creatures and creators of society.

Sociocultural Evolution

Because of this reciprocal relationship evolutionary trends are not completely predictable (just as biologists cannot predict the future of a particular species). But the mechanisms of sociocultural evolution are clear.