Evolutionism in the Work of the Founders

The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past. — WILLIAM FAULKNER

Evolutionism is pervasive in macrosociology. While there is a widespread belief among biologists and social scientists that evolutionary theory in the social sciences was borrowed from biology, the truth is much more complex. Darwin and other biologists borrowed from the ideas of Malthus and Spencer, just as Spencer was influenced by Darwin and other biologists. In fact, the term *evolution* itself was popularized by Darwin’s contemporary, Herbert Spencer, who was writing about social evolution years before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin did not use the term *evolution* in the first edition of his ground breaking work, preferring instead “descent with modifications” (Gould 1996, 137). But there is more than simple analogy involved in biological and social evolution; sociocultural evolution is but a specific case of the general evolutionary process.¹ Human populations are subject to environmental and biological influences just as other animal populations are. Evolution is a process by which populations are formed and transformed in response to changes in the environment; in organic evolution, inheritable
biological characteristics are formed and transformed; in sociocultural evolution, it is cultural information that undergoes these processes (Lenski 2005, 43).

The distinguishing characteristic of evolution is cumulative change, a process by which continuity of the organism—organic or social—is paramount while some elements of this organism are transformed or replaced to adapt more successfully to the environment. Cumulative change is a distinctive kind of change associated with systems composed of multiple, interrelated parts. Within these systems, some parts change while others remain unchanged. Thus, cumulative change is a process that combines elements of continuity with elements of change; many parts of the system are preserved for extended periods while new parts are added and other parts are either replaced or transformed. Earlier adaptations are “absorbed and incorporated” into newer biological or social systems, thus greatly influencing later adaptations by foreclosing many possible evolutionary paths or opening up new ones (Lenski 2005, 4, 188). Just as an animal’s past evolutionary history and its relation to the present environment is important in understanding that animal’s adaptation to its environment, so too, a society’s history is extremely important in understanding that society’s present structure and its relation to its environment. Finally, it should be noted that the process of evolution itself—whether inorganic, organic, or social—is itself cumulative and evolving (121). Thus, just as there are differences between inorganic and organic evolution, there are differences between organic and sociocultural evolution.²

In organic evolution, inheritable genetic characteristics act as the chief mechanism of descent through the generations; in sociocultural evolution, the chief mechanism is learning preserved through cultural institutions, oral traditions, graphic depictions, and, more recently, written, electronic, and photographic means. Rather than relying upon the chance transmutation of genetic material, sociocultural evolution relies upon teaching the next generation successful innovations. The speed of sociocultural evolution is therefore potentially many times faster than that of organic evolution and,
because of the nature of human beings, sociocultural evolution is potentially subject to purposeful direction. It should be noted, however, that this speed and potential purposefulness is itself evolving, sociocultural evolution having been incredibly slow and subject to little purposeful human action through much of prehistory and into the historic record. This change in purposefulness, of course, can be characterized as the rationalization process. Change in humans’ earliest social form, the hunting-and-gathering society, took place, if at all, over many generations; the first great transition, the Neolithic Revolution, in which hunting-and-gathering societies began to domesticate plants and animals, took place within individual sociocultural systems over thousands of years. While even this is much faster than organic evolution, the ever quickening pace of change since that revolution is testimony to the cumulative and evolving character of the evolutionary process itself.

Perhaps a more serious difference in organic and social evolution involves divergence. In biological evolution, once a species becomes distinct from others, it cannot recombine; it becomes separate forever. (This is no longer strictly true with recombinant DNA techniques that bring together genetic material from multiple sources, creating new sequences that would not otherwise be found in biological organisms. Again, this was a purposeful change brought about by the rationalization process and thus belongs more to sociocultural than biological evolution.) In sociocultural evolution, one of the chief mechanisms for acquiring adaptive strategies is contact with other sociocultural systems. Because of this, there is the potential—many social evolutionists would say, the long-term likelihood—that favourable adaptations will be adopted across sociocultural systems, leading to the long-term convergence of technologies, institutions, ideologies, and beliefs (Gould 1991, 65; 1996, 222). Prior to modernity and the pace and reach of industrial capitalist societies, it is notable that the vast majority of societies experienced little change over the course of their histories. But within the global system over time, societies have become larger and have developed more sophisticated technologies and more complex social structures (Nolan and Lenski 2011, 43, 57).
Sociocultural evolution exists on two distinct levels: the level of individual societies, which follow a divergent evolutionary path, and the level of the global system of societies, which follows a convergent path.

At the societal level, individuals respond to changes in their natural and social environments. Changes in the natural environment, which can be induced by human activities as well as by natural processes, include variations in soil fertility, the degree of forestation, and the availability of particular animal and plant species for exploitation. Changes in the social environment include those that result from contact of various sorts (economic, military, social) between sociocultural systems. The first contact of Europeans with the Americas, for example, brought tremendous changes to both the Old and the New Worlds. It is these changes in natural and social environments that cause individuals, bounded by a society’s distinct history and its storehouse of cultural and technical knowledge, to initiate adaptations within sociocultural systems.

The global system of societies evolves through a process of “intersocietal selection” that has dramatically reduced the number of sociocultural systems over the past ten thousand years. The growth of some societies in size, technology, complexity, and economic and military power has allowed them to prevail in conflicts over territory and resources with societies that have maintained more traditional sociocultural patterns (Nolan and Lenski 2011, 59–61). Successful adaptations are spread among societies through social contact, military conquest, and economic relations. The number and nature of these contacts depend upon geographic location and barriers (deserts, mountain ranges, oceans), as well as the technological levels (particularly with respect to transportation and communication technologies) of the societies involved. Societies that were environmentally positioned (in terms of the natural and social environments) to adopt innovations that led to increases in productivity, population, structural complexity, and economic and military power are those that have survived to transmit their culture and institutional patterns to others (63). Human societies are of a single species—successful adaptations undertaken by individual societies in response
to changes in their natural or social environments are passed on through the intersocietal selection process.

**EVOLUTIONISM IN MALTHUS AND SPENCER**

The ideas that came to be associated with evolution—both biological and social—were very much a part of early nineteenth-century Western thought. In his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Thomas Robert Malthus argues that the primary mechanism of change is the struggle for subsistence. For all life, he asserts, the power of reproduction is far greater than the ability of the earth to provide sustenance. New life, therefore, is in competition for what nature will provide. Malthus came to believe that God works through natural processes to form and shape all life on earth. Through observing nature, Malthus claims, we can see the workings of God, and what Malthus saw became a remarkable precursor to evolutionary theory. The world, he speculates, is a mighty process for the formation of life. Life forms change in response to the competition for sustenance: “The powers of selection, combination, and transmutation, which every seed shews, are truly miraculous. Who can imagine that these wonderful faculties are contained in these little bits of matter?” (77). In that process of change, he notes, many life forms will reach dead ends and cease to exist, while others will propagate and come nearer to the creator. “Many vessels will necessarily come out of this great furnace in wrong shapes. These will be broken and thrown aside as useless; while those vessels whose forms are full of truth, grace, and loveliness, will be wafted into happier situations, nearer the presence of the mighty maker” (79). He finds these speculations on evolutionary change to be “consistent equally with the natural phenomena around us, with the events of human life, and with the successive revelations of God to man, to suppose that the world is a mighty process for the creation and formation of mind” (79). Both Charles Darwin ([1876] 1958) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1905) credit Malthus as one of their primary inspirations in the development of evolutionary theory.
This evolutionary process continues, Malthus argues, in the evolution of human societies. The hand of the creator, acting through natural law, has created an earth in which food will not grow in great quantities unless humans invest much labour and ingenuity in the process. The great awakeners of the human mind are the wants of the body. It is hunger and want that stimulate the brain of an infant to attain language and consciousness, and such stimulants throughout life motivate people to work, think, and therefore thrive. If such stimulants were removed, a great number of people would sink into torpor and sloth. It is because population increases much faster than our ability to produce food that humankind has been pushed to intensify the cultivation of the earth, to create civilization. It was the necessity of food that drove humans to develop agriculture and ever more sophisticated technologies and practices to secure our livelihood (Malthus 1798, 113–14).

In addition to his influence on the biologists, Malthus had a profound effect on Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in his formulation of social evolutionary theory. Originating in a series of papers beginning in 1842, Spencer’s evolutionary theory became fully explicit in his first major work, *Social Statics*, published in 1850. In this work, he explains the cumulative nature of evolutionary change, claiming that nature is infinitely complex and ever developing and that each new form has additional influence “destined to some degree to modify all future results” ([1850] 1954, 45). Spencer views evolutionary change as constant, “in the decompositions and recombinations of matter, and in the constantly-varying forms of animal and vegetable life. . . . With an altering atmosphere, and a decreasing temperature, land and sea perpetually bring forth fresh races of insects, plants, and animals” (45). Humans, being a part of nature, are part of this “universal mutation,” and human development follows evolutionary laws: “His circumstances are ever changing; and he is ever adapting himself to them” (46).

The universe and all life in it evolves, Spencer proposes, and society is but the latest phenomenon to conform to this natural law. For Spencer, it is not that social evolution parallels natural evolution or
that social evolution has much in common with natural evolution but rather that it is an extension of organic evolutionary principles. He contends that the main engine of social evolution is increases in the size (or population) of social units. Societies, he suggests, are like living bodies. They begin as small groups of people, relatively homogeneous, all sharing similar tasks and with similar values and beliefs. In the early stages of social evolution, all share in the food gathering, hut building, and tool making. But as the population increases, a division of labour necessarily develops, the structure of the society becomes more complex, and the differences between people caused by the increasing division of labour become more pronounced. As the population becomes more diverse in terms of occupation, experience, wealth, interests, and values, the people also become more dependent upon one another. “And the mutually dependent parts, living by and for another, form an aggregate constituted on the same general principle as is an individual organism” ([1876] 1967, 8). Like a living organism, Spencer claims, the various parts of a society form a whole, and the whole becomes increasingly dependent upon the functioning of all of its parts.

As social evolution continues, production processes become more complex and the division of labour becomes ever more specialized, causing the structure of the society to become more complex and more dependent upon the proper functioning of the various parts. As in a living body, regulating systems arise: at first, they are simple, but as evolution progresses, they become increasingly complex and layered, with “supreme centers” and subordinate ones, “and the supreme centers begin to enlarge and complicate” (46). While Spencer often uses the terms progress and evolution interchangeably, he is somewhat more subtle than the unilinear theorist that many make him out to be. Some critics misinterpret him, claiming that he saw all societies as passing through the same stages of development. Spencer’s evolutionary system is much more open-ended than that. Rather than set stages, he proposes a general direction of increasing complexity. Furthermore, he recognizes that not all societies evolve and that while the process of evolution is inevitable for human societies as a
whole, it is not inevitable or even probable for each particular society. Retrogression is as likely as progress, he notes, and stability more likely still. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1862–96, 1:96), he writes: “A social organism, like an individual organism, undergoes modifications until it comes into equilibrium with environing conditions; and thereupon continues without further change of structure.” Once a society reaches this equilibrium with its environment, evolution continues only in terms of the increasing integration of the parts of the sociocultural system.

Spencer also wrote about the importance of a society’s social environment—its relations with other societies—in affecting its own evolutionary path and that of human societies in general. With peaceful relations come relatively decentralized and weak systems of government; with hostile relations come highly centralized and authoritarian forms of government. And it is these relations between sociocultural systems that provide the key to human social evolution. Again in *Principles* (1862–96, 1:280), he writes: “In the struggle for existence among societies, the survival of the fittest is the survival of those in which the power of military cooperation is the greatest; and military cooperation is that primary kind of cooperation which prepares the way for other kinds. So that this formation of larger societies by the union of smaller ones in war, and this destruction or absorption of the smaller un-united societies by the larger ones is an inevitable process through which the varieties of men most adapted for social life, supplant the less adapted varieties.” Spencer was very clear that he did not consider evolution to be fueled by some inherent natural force but rather by a society’s history, population level and growth, division of labour, and relationship to its natural and social environments. Growth in population level as a result of conquering new territories or adopting new production technologies, changes in the natural environment, or intersocietal contact—warfare, absorption by more powerful neighbours, political and economic alliances, or simply cultural diffusion of innovations—all lead to the evolution of human societies. Adaptations made in the past then affect future changes. Spencer came to see the social evolutionary process as one
of increasing complexity in human societies—that is, growing populations, intensifying production technologies, an increasing division of labour, and greater integration of this increasing heterogeneity through social organization.

The evolutionary theories of Malthus and Spencer fell into considerable disrepute in twentieth-century social science. Some of their ideas had been appropriated by advocates of social Darwinism, who argued that society should allow unfit members, such as the poor and the mentally ill, to suffer and die, rather than developing social programs to help them survive—in which case they would only have children, whose existence would pose an even greater obstacle to social progress in the future. “Survival of the fittest,” a term coined by Spencer, was soon used to justify the position and privilege of the elite in Western societies and to damn the poor and the other “non-productive” members of the society to their lot. This, as Carneiro (2003, 68) rightly points out, is a political program, not a social theory. This political philosophy was abhorrent to many social scientists, and as it became increasingly linked to the early social evolutionists (sometimes fittingly so), explicit theories of social evolution in the tradition of Malthus and Spencer were mostly abandoned. They only made their reappearance, rather tentatively, in the cultural anthropology of the 1930s, and only in the past fifty years, in macrosociology. Before we pick up that thread, however, we will explore the unilinear evolution of Marx and Engels as well as the implicit assumption of social evolution in the sociology of Durkheim and Weber, for modern macrosociology draws heavily upon all of these traditions.

**EVOLUTIONISM IN MARX AND ENGELS**

While often viewed as revolutionary, the sociological theory of Marx and Engels is explicitly evolutionary in character. According to Marx ([1859] 1911, 13), society has moved through several evolutionary stages, from a communal arrangement based on hunting and
gathering whatever nature provided to societies based on state and religious power (Asiatic), slavery (ancient), land (feudal), and capital (bourgeois). While he saw struggle as the moving force of the evolutionary process, this struggle was only rarely violent in character. Marx’s theory posits that since humankind left the communal societies of prehistory, society has been based on the domination of powerful elites over the mass of people. The power of elites is rooted in their control of the forces of production; this power is often contested, with subordinate groups struggling to increase their share of wealth and power. Technologies of production affect human organization based upon the control of these means. As these technologies change in response to a depleting environment or to new discoveries, the relations between the dominant and subordinate groups change. As new technologies develop, power differentials between the groups shift, and at times, new elites arise based upon their control of new and more powerful production technologies. It is this struggle between dominant and subordinate groups that is the engine of history, the engine, if you will, of sociocultural evolution.

Marx ([1867] 1915, 786) recognizes that these changes are not instantaneous but occur over the course of generations: “The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.” Marx and Engels often use the term revolution in the sense of a drastically different way of behaving or thinking. As when anthropologists or sociologists use the term in referring to the Neolithic or Industrial Revolutions, Marx and Engels are not talking about an instantaneous change but rather transformative changes that often take place over generations, sometimes over thousands of years.

What, aside from its insistence on gradual and incremental speed, makes Marx’s theory evolutionary? Most significantly, it is based on cumulative historical change of human societies in response to a changing environment. The first human societies, Marx argues, were communal in nature. These classless societies existed with a minimal division of labour and were relatively egalitarian in nature.
With the domestication of plants and animals, an increasing specialization of crafts and roles appeared, bringing in its wake differential access to resources as well as differing material interests. These divisions eventually led to the formation of groups of differing status, which acted in antagonistic co-operation to meet their biological and psychological needs. As the material means of production change, the social relations based on these productive forces necessarily alter and transform. In a classic evolutionary statement, Marx ([1867] 1915, 197–98) writes: “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.”

According to Marx, every sociocultural system produces counter forces that eventually lead to new social forms. Over time, these forces become so great that they tap into new resources to satisfy human needs, at which point the social relations are transformed. The rise of capitalism began with changes in the mode of production in the last third of the fifteenth century and in the opening decades of the sixteenth. Innovations in wool manufacturing caused a rise in the price of wool in England. In response, feudal lords transformed their holdings from manorial systems—in which thousands of peasants had rights to farming the land in exchange for labour and crops—into pasture land for sheep. The peasants had as much right to the land as the lords, Marx points out, but the nobility, weakened by incessant wars, “was the child of its time, for which money was the power of all powers.” Against all opposition of king and Parliament, the feudal lords forcibly drove the peasantry from the common land. The serf is “freed” of his bond to the soil and torn from his means of subsistence. He becomes unprotected and without rights to a livelihood, with nothing to sell but his labour ([1867] 1915, 789–90). Marx notes, “The history of this expropriation, in different countries,
assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods. In England alone, which we take as our example, has it the classic form” (787).

The structure of capitalist society grew out of the guilds, markets, and towns that were in increasing conflict with feudal lords, the church, and the central nobility. The newly emerging merchant class eventually amassed great wealth and began to challenge the hold of the elites who had dominated the feudal order through shifting alliances with nobility and monarchy. This revolutionary class began to view existing property relations (feudalism) as a restraint on the further development of their interests: the production of goods through the factory system. Many modern historians and sociologists have taken up this perspective, asserting that the fact that feudal Europe’s elite were split among church, centralized monarchy, and feudal lords was a large factor in the successful rise of capitalism.

Marx predicted that similar tensions and eventual class conflict would arise in late capitalist societies, bringing on a new social order. Like all previous existing economic systems, capitalism carries the seeds of its own destruction. The capitalist system necessarily goes through regular periods of boom and bust as the productive forces unleashed by capitalism far outstrip its ability to sell its goods at a profit. These periodic crises create great hardship for workers, who live only through selling their labour, and bankrupt many of the capitalists themselves. Over time, Marx predicted, capitalism would necessarily lead to enormous amounts of wealth and political power being placed in very few hands: that is, to monopoly capitalism in which a few control all the big industries as well as the state. At the same time, he foresaw that the mass of people would become relatively impoverished in terms of both wealth and political power and would continue to be subjected to periodic crashes of the economic system. As capitalism continued to evolve, he forecast, the situation would become intolerable for the great masses of people, and the working classes would begin to exercise the power of their numbers and take control of the means of production through the nation-state, gradually establishing industrial production as a means of
satisfying the wants and needs of the people rather than increasing the profit of the few.

Engels, of course, recognized the explicit evolutionism in Marx’s theory and referred to it in his eulogy for his friend:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case. (Engels 1883)

We will examine Marx’s analysis and predictions for capitalism in more detail in a later chapter; for now, suffice it to say that he had a well-defined evolutionary theory.

John Bellamy Foster demonstrates that Marx was also concerned with the impact of both population and production on the natural environment and on the workers. Foster (2000, 116) argues that, according to Marx, man is a part of nature and can only live within nature’s limits. Since material conditions make life and society possible, both the number of people and the means by which they exploit their environment to meet their needs are central to understanding the sociocultural system. Driven by the accumulation of capital, Marx argues, the production process intensifies its exploitation of both workers and the environment. Foster quotes Marx on the need to care for the environment: “From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously
existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* [good heads of household]” (Marx [1894] 1991, 911, quoted in Foster 2000, 164). Under the rule of capital, the greater the wealth, the more it becomes concentrated in the hands of a few; the greater this concentration, the more developed the machinery of production, the more extensive the mass of workers and the poor, and the more intensive the exploitation of the masses and of the earth itself.

**EVOLUTIONISM IN WEBER**

Weber’s analysis of sociocultural change is based on cumulative changes in sociocultural systems, with changes in one component of society leading to changes in others, and eventually, to changes in the overall system itself. Weber’s writings attest to his identity as a social evolutionist asserting cumulative systemic change. As mentioned previously, he uses the term *evolution* extensively in his writings, even in several chapter titles and section headings. While he is far too much of a systems theorist to assert the near “single causality” of Marx and his followers, he clearly gives material and structural factors great weight in his analysis of sociocultural change. ⁸

Some have argued that Weber went so far as to claim that the rationalization process itself was an inevitable evolutionary development. For example, Gerth and Mills (Weber, [1946] 1958, 51) characterize the rationalization process as Weber’s “philosophy of history,” with the rise and fall of empires and nations, rulers, and classes progressively serving the drift toward a bureaucratized and rationalized world. Certain passages from Weber support this; perhaps the most telling are remarks that Weber made to the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy) in Vienna in 1909, in which he warned of the dangers of bureaucratization. Perhaps because it was a political speech rather than the careful scholarship for which he is known, Weber was much more expressive than usual of his personal reactions.
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To this day there has never existed a bureaucracy which could compare with that of Egypt. This is known to everyone who knows the social history of ancient times; and it is equally apparent that to-day we are proceeding towards an evolution which resembles that system in every detail, except that it is built on other foundations, on technically more perfect, more rationalized, and therefore much more mechanized foundations. The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?—for that is impossible, but what will come of it? We willingly admit that there are honourable and talented men at the top of our administration; that in spite of all the exceptions such people have opportunities to rise in the official hierarchy, just as the universities, for instance, claim that, in spite of all the exceptions, they constitute a chance of selection for talent. But horrible as the thought is that the world may one day be peopled with professors [laughter]—we would retire on to a desert island if such a thing were to happen [laughter]—it is still more horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones—a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative system, and specially of its offspring, the students. This passion for bureaucracy, as we have heard it expressed here, is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics the spectre of timidity—which has in any case always been rather a good standby for the German—were to stand alone at the helm; as if we were deliberately to become men who need “order” and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of
mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life. The answer to this question to-day clearly does not lie here. (Quoted in Mayer 1944, 127–28).

More famously (and traditionally more available), Weber ([1904] 1930, 181–82) strikes similar themes in the closing paragraphs of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism:

This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. To-day the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. . . . In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved.”
This passage contains several notable ideas. First, note how, in the first paragraph, Weber ties the social order “to the technical and economic conditions of machine production,” which now “determine the lives of all.” Capitalism, Weber proposes, is one of the primary carriers of bureaucracy and rationalization, and he sees its triumph as having dire consequences for the entire society—specifically, an iron cage in which social life is dominated by bureaucratic organization and centred on the acquisition of material goods. Note also that the only limit he sees on the continuing mechanization and bureaucratization of society appears to be the availability of fossil fuels upon which it is based.

In the second paragraph, Weber makes clear that while the Protestant ethic facilitated the emergence of capitalism, capital now exists independently of that ethic. As we have seen, Weber came to believe that material and structural factors played a much larger role than ideas in the origin of capitalism, yet true to his systemic view of society, he continued to see a role for ideas in his sociology. It is also interesting that, at this early date, he likens the pursuit of profit to sport. No longer motivated by the association of wealth with moral value but instead by “purely mundane passions,” such as greed and the desire for victory, capitalists focus increasingly on winning the economic game, as proof to all of their worth.

In the final paragraph of the extract above, Weber again speculates on where evolution is taking us. Will such "nullities" continue? Will society remain enclosed in the iron cage in which tradition, values, and emotions play an ever diminishing role and goal-oriented rational behaviour increasingly rules our lives in the quest for wealth and material possessions? Will such “nullities” continue to imagine that they are living at the pinnacle of civilization? Or will this trend finally be reversed by the rise of new prophets and charismatics calling us to higher purpose?

Some argue that these speculations are not part of Weber’s theory but rather of his all-too-human reaction to his analysis. This is supported in the final paragraphs of *The Protestant Ethic* ([1904] 1930, 182), where he writes that the above lament is one of “judgments
of value and faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened.” But he did burden his discussion with this, and although his speculations go beyond his historical analysis, they are consistent with the evolutionary trends identified in that analysis. Regardless, many of his followers have incorporated this pessimistic view of evolution into their analysis, for once it is encountered, who could escape it?\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{E\textsc{volution}ism in D\textsc{urkheim}}

Durkheim’s theory, too, is thoroughly imbued with an evolutionary perspective: indeed, he often makes direct comparisons between organic and social evolution.\textsuperscript{11} While much, of course, depends upon context and the translator, the term \textit{evolution} appears some twenty-one times in \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life} and up to forty times in \textit{The Division of Labor in Society}—mostly in the context of social evolution. Even when he forgoes the use of the term \textit{evolution}, his analysis is often infused with the concept of cumulative change. In \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}, for example, in a paragraph in which he also extols the historical-comparative method, Durkheim ([1912] 1954, 15–16) argues for the value of analyzing early religious forms in order to understand religion’s role in modern society. In so doing, he sounds themes of cumulative and historical change through time:

In the first place, we cannot arrive at an understanding of the most recent religions except by following the manner in which they have been progressively composed in history. In fact, historical analysis is the only means of explanation which is possible to apply to them. It alone enables us to resolve an institution into its constituent elements, for it shows them to us as they are born in time, one after another. On the other hand, by placing every one of them in the condition where it was born, it puts into our hands the only means we have of determining the causes which gave rise to it. Every time
that we undertake to explain something human, taken at a given
moment in history—be it religious belief, moral precept, a legal
principle, an aesthetic style or an economic system—it is necessary
to commence by going back to its most primitive and simple form,
to try to account for the characteristics by which it was marked at
that time, and then to show how it developed and became com-
plicated little by little, and how it became that which it is at the
moment in question. One readily understands the importance
which the determination of the point of departure has for this series
of progressive explanations, for all the others are attached to it.

We can discern in this excerpt a direction to Durkheim’s evolution-
ary theorizing: in his sociology, he repeatedly returns to a social
evolutionary process in which population growth causes greater
competition for needed resources within a society, thus increasing
the division of labour and magnifying differences in the material
interests, values, and beliefs of that population.

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim ([1893] 1997, 84)
identifies two types of solidarity, the foundations of which differ. Mechanical solidarity is “the solidarity that derives from simi-
larities”: it is based on commonalities—experiences that are shared
by most, if not all, individuals in the group. This type of solidar-
ity occurs in so-called primitive societies, in which the division of
labour remains very simple. Such societies tend to be homogeneous:
all individuals engage in similar tasks and daily activities, and all
have much the same experiences. Relatively few distinct institutions
exist, and those that do express a largely consistent set of values and
norms, which thus serve to reinforce one another. In such societies,
individuals and their experiences, beliefs, values, and behaviour are a
reflection of the society as a whole. Durkheim holds that mechanical
solidarity “is at its maximum when the collective consciousness com-
pletely envelops our total consciousness, coinciding with it at every
point” (84). In other words, the society confronts the individual with
such overwhelming and monolithic force that there is little room
for individuality or deviance from this collective consciousness: the
collective and individual consciousnesses are virtually identical. For this reason, Durkheim proposes, traditional cultures dominated by mechanical solidarity have a high degree of moral integration, which is usually embodied in religion. By engaging in religious ritual, the people reaffirm their solidarity with these moral precepts and with one another.

Durkheim’s second form of solidarity “organic solidarity,” is a result of the division of labour. As population grows and the sociocultural system necessarily becomes more complex in its production processes, individuals must play increasingly specialized roles and thus become more dissimilar in their material interests, social experiences, and consequent values and beliefs. In such sociocultural systems, individuals have less in common with one another, but at the same time, they become more dependent upon one another. The farmer depends on the manufacturer for farm machinery, the factory worker on the farmer for food; both rely on the carpenter for shelter, and on and on. In such a system, Durkheim says, individualism grows at the expense of common values and beliefs, and the normative rules of society. With the loosening of these common values and beliefs, the individual’s sense of community or identity with the group weakens, and with the weakening of the social bond, social norms and values no longer provide individuals with coherent, consistent, or insistent moral guidance.

Although the diversity of norms and values liberates the individual from tradition and the hierarchies of family, church, and community, diversity also creates problems. According to Durkheim, individuals who lack any source of social restraint will tend to satisfy their own appetites with little thought of the possible effect that their actions will have on others. The individual is left to find his or her own way in the world—a world in which personal options for behaviour have multiplied as strong and insistent norms have weakened.

Durkheim saw the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity as an evolutionary trend, pointing out that “as we mount the scale of social evolution,” mechanical solidarity becomes progressively weaker and organic solidarity becomes stronger ([1893] 1997, 105).
And this, of course, is a consequence of population growth and the associated growth in the division of labour, as well as the changes caused by these developments in the structure and cultural superstructure of the sociocultural system. “Thus it is a law of history,” he writes, “that mechanical solidarity, which at first is isolated, or more so, should progressively lose ground, and organic solidarity gradually become preponderant. But when the way in which men are solidly linked to one another is modified, it is inevitable that the structure of society should change. The shape of a body needs be transformed, when the molecular affinities within are no longer the same” (126).

Durkheim ([1893] 1997, 119–20) extends this analysis to the future, positing that this evolutionary trend must necessarily continue. As religion continues to become less and less encompassing, the collective consciousness will continue to weaken:

If there is one truth that history has incontrovertibly settled, it is that religion extends over an ever diminishing area of social life. Originally, it extended to everything; everything social was religious—the two words were synonymous. Then gradually political, economic, and scientific functions broke free from the religious function, becoming separate entities and taking on more and more a markedly temporal character. God, if we may express it in such a way, from being at first present in every human relationship, has progressively withdrawn. He leaves the world to men and their quarrels. At least, if He continues to rule it, it is from on high and afar off, and the effect that He exercises, becoming more general and indeterminate, leaves freer rein for human forces. The individual thus feels, and he is in reality, much less acted upon; he becomes more a source of spontaneous activity. In short, not only is the sphere of religion not increasing at the same time as that of the temporal world, nor in the same proportion, but it is continually diminishing. This regression did not begin at any precise moment in history, but one can follow the phases of its development from the very origins of social evolution. It is therefore bound up with the basic conditions for the development of
societies and thus demonstrates that there is a constantly decreasing number of beliefs and collective sentiments that are both sufficiently collective and strong enough to assume a religious character. This means that the average intensity of the common consciousness is itself weakening.

As we will see in later chapters, Durkheim held that it is only through religious organization, family, and other community-based groups that social values can be instilled in individuals—values and beliefs that call the individual to act in unselfish, altruistic ways. These are the very groups, however, that are being weakened by the continuing division of labour; they are rapidly losing their utilitarian functions as the state and the corporation become enlarged and more encompassing.13

**CONVERGENCE**

The standard practice is to highlight the differences between theorists, to carve out a separate path for a favourite theorist and demonstrate why that theorist’s vision is sharper and clearer than all others. My goal, of course, is different; I wish to point out where these early sociologists agree. They share more with one another than the simple fact of being evolutionary theorists; as with the evolutionary theories of their counterparts in biology, their evolutionary theories have much common ground. All societies must live within the changing constraints of their environments, changes that occur as a result of both human activities and natural processes. The process of adapting to changes in the natural and social environments begins with the individual and the modifications that individuals make to their productive and reproductive practices. When large numbers of people within the population make similar adaptations, these create patterns, which in turn affect institutional structures (primary and secondary groups) and cultural superstructures (ideas, values, and ideologies). All of the founders of the discipline concluded that as
corporate and state organizations enlarge and centralize, smaller primary groups such as clan, family, church, community, and guild lose their functions and salience. The result of this evolutionary trend is material and spiritual poverty for the great mass of people, as individualism, commodification, and consumerism become a way of life.

Of the founders, Weber, with his incessant focus on the sociocultural system as a whole, constructed the most general theory of the evolutionary process that occurs in a society’s structure and superstructure in response to, and in interaction with, infrastructural intensification. According to Weber, the intensification of production processes and the growth of population result in the enlargement and centralization of the bureaucracy of both the state and capital enterprise and a consequent decline in the function and role of primary groups. Bureaucratization of structure leads in turn to a rise in goal-oriented rational behaviour among individuals (rationalization). Rationalization, of course, provides positive feedback to bureaucratization, and bureaucracies (private and public) and the rationalization of the superstructure contribute to the intensification of the infrastructure. For what is bureaucratization but the ever greater role of goal-oriented thinking—observation, logic, science—applied to human organization? What corporate or state bureaucracy—the first under the spur of profit, the second under ever tightening budgets—does not seek greater efficiency and productivity? And what is intensification but goal-oriented behaviour applied to technology, labour, and population? Using the founders of sociology as guides, I attempt in the next chapter to integrate the theories and insights of contemporary macro theorists into a systematic theory of sociocultural evolution.