

Source: Weinstein, J. 2010. *Social Change*. 3rd ed. Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, Maryland.

"FITNESS," ADAPTATION, AND THE DIRECTION OF EVOLUTION

In view of these complicating factors, social researchers are especially concerned with two basic questions whose answers are taken for granted in organic theories:

1. Are the human populations that exist today better adapted than those that are extinct, and, if so, does this mean that the current social and cultural characteristics shared by members are also better adapted than in the past?
2. Are some existing peoples better adapted than others, and, if so, by what criteria: population size, growth rates, economic wealth? What are the traits that distinguish the fittest existing populations, and how do their societies and cultures differ from those of less fit populations?

In general, one can divide evolutionists into three main camps, or theoretical orientations, according to how they answer these questions: progressive, cyclical, and regressive (Lasch 1973, 1991).

Progressive Theory

Adam Smith, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and the majority of later theorists as well have generally agreed that (1) some existing populations and their social and cultural traits are better adapted than those of the past, and sociocultural evolution is essentially a process of improvement in adaptability, and (2) at the pinnacle of the evolutionary hierarchy are the peoples who share modern, Western culture. Although there have been significant disputes among those who accept these principles (especially along ideological lines), as a whole they make up the progressive mainstream of social evolutionists.

In his "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy*," Marx ([1859] 1969) argued that "in broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, Feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as *progressive* epochs in the economic formation of society" (504, my emphasis). For him and other radical and liberal theorists, populations that have reached the latest, most highly "bourgeois" stages are the fittest, and their survival proves it.

We should note here that the progress to which Marx was referring does not occur in an even, ever-increasing fashion. Rather, as the result of successive rises and overthrows of the modes of production, the overall drift of history is toward an increase in material culture. In any case, progressives, including Marxists, need not believe that everything is always getting "better."

Cyclical Theory

Among the major evolutionary models that diverge from this mainstream are the cyclical theories of Pitirim A. Sorokin (discussed later) and Vilfredo Pareto, the major figure in Italian social science at the turn of the twentieth century: "Pareto explicitly and emphatically rejected the theory of linear social evolution. . . . In its place he puts mainly a theory of cycles according to which social forms pass through a series of stages

which are *repeated again and again* in approximately the same order” (Parsons 1937, 178, my emphasis).

From this perspective, no era or culture can be designated as “higher” in any absolute sense. Processes akin to natural selection operate, through which some groups or ideas reign over others because they are more “fit,” but only in the short run. Over longer periods, dominant groups become obsolete and fall victim to the very conditions that once worked to their advantage. As a result, we can expect to see periodic declines and falls, along with repetition of the same general styles and themes in different times and places.

Regressive Theory

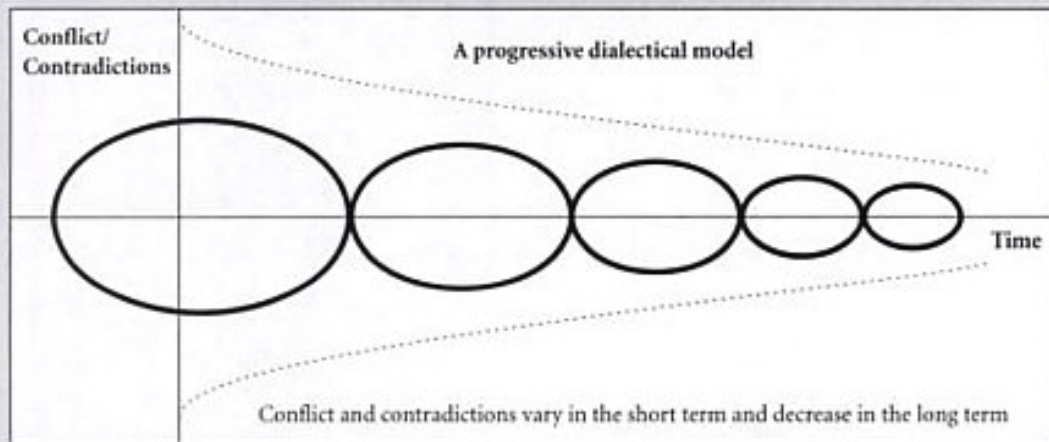
Sigmund Freud, in his later sociological writings, departs even more sharply from the progressive position.² Viewing sociocultural evolution as an essentially regressive process, he argued that in the long run there has been significant deterioration in humanity’s psychic conditions (for an extended discussion of this side of Freud, see Brown 1959). “If civilization is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then—as a result of inborn conflict arising from ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between the trends of love and death—there is inextricably bound up with it an increase in the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate” (Freud 1961, 80).

Freud was not the only observer of Western civilization to conclude that humanity is on the road to ruin. Conservative thinkers as far back as Plato have viewed historical change as essentially a process of deterioration. Numerous contemporary writers as well, some influenced by Freud and others not, from Oswald Spengler (see below) in the early twentieth century to Christopher Lasch in the latter half of the century, have taken exception to progressive interpretations of history.

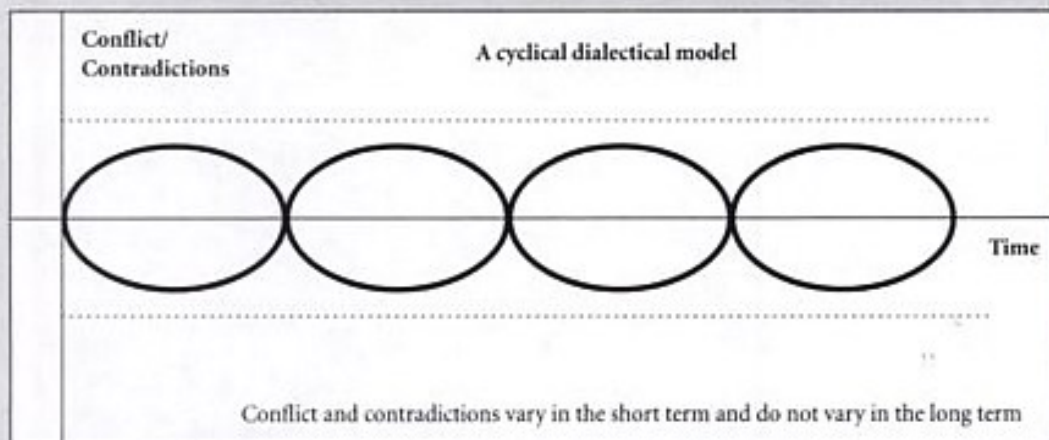
Such disparity among leading theorists about the direction in which evolution is headed reflects the fact that, in the case of human beings, it is not clear how “advance” is to be measured. How do we judge that one culture is more highly evolved than another? What standard do we use to evaluate progress?

Spencer and other classic progressives used population size and growth rates, arguing that a large and robust population is healthiest and fittest. But, according to the development models used by most progressive theorists today, there is very little correlation between population size and advance. Moreover, the fastest growing populations now unexceptionably have the least developed economies. Marx pointed to the capacity of successive sociocultural systems (feudal, bourgeois, and so on) to generate surplus. But, as we are well aware, the societies with the greatest productive capacity also produce the most waste and do the greatest damage to the global ecosystem. Freud, writing during the early period of the Holocaust, stressed moral development, especially the burden of guilt and inner conflict different societies bear and express in destructive behavior. Yet the same civilization responsible for the Holocaust created in its aftermath the first viable framework for international representative government and the first-ever doctrine of universal human rights.

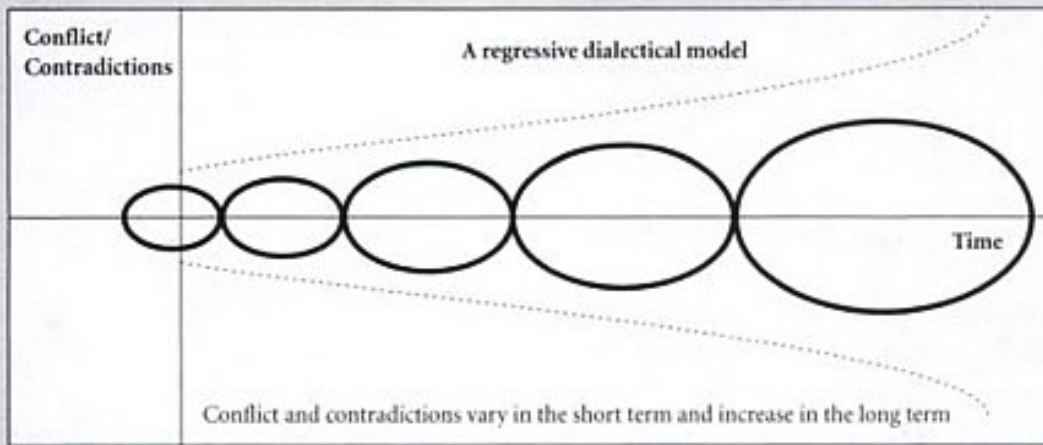
Box 2.2 DIALECTICAL AND LINEAR EVOLUTIONARY MODELS



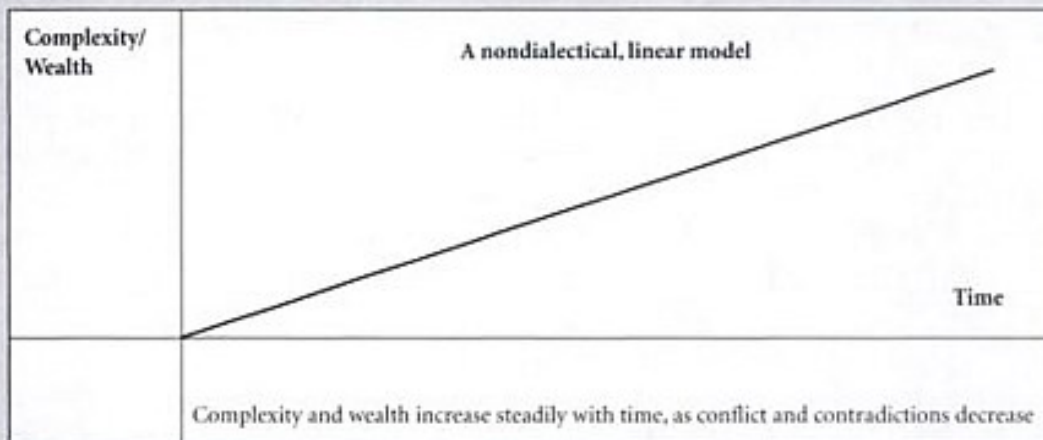
The **dialectic** is a mechanism that brings about change through the ironic success-leads-to-failure principle. Thus, in Marx's **progressive** account, Europe's feudal rulers contributed to their own downfall by inadvertently empowering their enemies, the bourgeoisie, over the course of centuries. At first, the Church and monarchy exploited this class for its commercial skills, which helped enrich their regimes. But in the process, the traders and financiers benefited from the patronage to the extent that they developed an ultimately decisive power base outside of the established system. By the end of the eighteenth century, they were able to overthrow the old regime thanks to its initial support.



Cycles, on the other hand, are patterns that, according to Spengler, Pareto, and Sorokin, are traced over longer or shorter periods of dialectical change. That is, all of these cyclical theories are also dialectical. The real difference between Marx's and, say, Pareto's account is that the former views the overall course of history as progressive, despite alternating periods of rise and decline, whereas the latter did not believe that things ever actually improve (or actually get worse, for that matter).



Plato and Freud were dialecticians as well. But they saw the overall course of history as **regression**.



So-called **linear** models depict a course of evolution in which the rate of change is constant throughout the course of history. Usually associated with modernization theory, these are different from other types because they lack the characteristic stress on dialectic, conflict, and irony. However, modernization theorists, including functionalists such as Parsons (1951, 1964), recognize that events do accelerate and decelerate; and most agree that, in the very long term, the overall trend is acceleration (e.g., each successive age is shorter than the preceding one), not constancy as the shape of a line suggests. Thus, in comparison to other approaches, it is more accurate to think of modernization theory not as "linear" but as a nondialectical/progressive type (whereas the Marxist model is dialectical-progressive, Pareto's is dialectical-cyclical, and Freud's is dialectical-regressive). Sorokin is more difficult to classify, but overall his grand scheme is best viewed as cyclical to emphasize the recurring outcomes of the ideational-sensate dialectic.