6.6C: Lenski’s Sociological Evolution Approach

Lenski’s sociological evolution approach views technological progress as the most basic factor in the evolution of societies and cultures.

Learning Objectives

- Describe Lenski’s four stages of human development

Key Points

- Sociocultural evolution is an umbrella term for theories of cultural evolution and social evolution, describing how cultures and societies have changed over time.
- Gerhard Lenski is an American sociologist known for contributions to the sociology of religion, social inequality, and ecological-evolutionary social theory.
- Lenski views technological progress as the most basic factor in the evolution of societies and cultures.
- Lenski distinguishes four stages of human development, based on advances in the history of communication. In these four stages, information is passed on in this order: genetically, individually, through signs, and lastly, through symbols or language.
- The relationship between population and production is central to Lenski’s thought.

Key Terms

- **shared culture**: Lenski claims that members of a society are united by a shared culture, although cultural patterns become more diverse as a society gains more complex technology and information.
Gerhard Lenski: He is an American sociologist known for contributions to the sociology of religion, social inequality, and ecological-evolutionary social theory.

Sociocultural evolution: It is an umbrella term for theories of cultural evolution and social evolution, describing how cultures and societies have changed over time.

Technological Progress

Agriculture: A tractor ploughing an alfalfa field circa 1921.

In his books, Power and Privilege and Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology, Lenski expands on the works of Leslie White and Lewis Henry Morgan. He views technological progress as the most basic factor in the evolution of societies and cultures. Unlike White, who defined technology as the ability to create and utilize energy, Lenski focuses on information, its amount and its uses.

Four Stages of Human Development

Lenski claims that members of a society are united by a shared culture, although cultural patterns become more diverse as a society gains more complex technology and information. The more information and knowledge a given society has, especially where it allows humans to shape their environment, the more advanced it is. He distinguishes four stages of human development, based on advances in the history of communication.

In the first stage, information is passed by genes. In the second state, with the development of agriculture, humans are able to pass information through individual experience. In the third, humans begin to use signs and develop logic. In the fourth, they create symbols, and develop language and writing. Advances in the technology of communication translate into advances in a society's economic system and political system, distribution of goods, social inequality and other...
Population and Production

The relationship between population and production is central to Lenski’s thought. Human reproductive capacity exceeds the available resources in the environment. Thus, Lenski concludes, human populations are limited by their capability of food production. According to Lenski, human capacity for population growth has been a “profoundly destabilizing force throughout human history and may well be the ultimate source of most social and cultural change.” It is the relationships among population, production, and environment that drive sociocultural evolution.

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