The Theory of Cultural Lag and the Veblenian Contribution

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Introduction

The intellectual fashion of the times has decreed that in all really learned discussions diagnosing the ills of modern society, there must be the tacit underlying assumption that no matter what specific points the participants may bring up to explain their own particular views, the basic cause of all social disturbances and upheavals may be adequately and finally summed up in the term, cultural lag (or social lag). Furthermore, there is another tacit assumption that no one will be called upon to explain seriously the meaning of the term; there is, as it were, a common agreement to keep it nebulous and vague, a conspiracy in restraint of clarity.

In a like manner, virtually every book analyzing the weightier issues of the day, whether written for the Tome-of-the-Week club member or for the more serious student, pays at least a passing tribute to this ubiquitous phrase. But rarely is there an attempt to explain the concept behind the phrase. In common practice the writer will reel off a list of malfunctioning elements in our society and then attribute their cause to social lag, letting it go at that. It is difficult to think of a phrase which has been so generally used with such abandon.

Its popularity is not hard to understand. There is something definitely appealing about the idea that there are two elements or processes moving along in more-or-less the same direction and that all of our troubles result from the fact that one moves at a slower speed than the other. The remedy then appears easy—all that remains to be done is to apply some sort of whip to the slower process! And there are as many "whips" suggested as there are propagandists and other writers on the subject.

The term has even acquired a strong moral flavor, and consequently we find, of all people, "avant-garde" churchmen preaching about the anachronistic elements in our society. Occasionally they point to nationalism and militarism as examples, but beyond that, these priests of the "devout observances" conveniently overlook other ceremonial activities.

This, then, is a brief survey of cultural lag in its popular use or misuse. Does the term have any real meaning or significance? If so, just exactly what is the nature of cultural lag? What are its causes? What did
Veblen contribute to our understanding of it? These are some of the questions which will be considered in this paper.

**The Meaning of Cultural Lag**

*General Sociological Meaning*

To go a step further and remove some of the ambiguity surrounding the term, we shall begin by inquiring into the usual meaning of cultural lag for the purpose of later relating this to Veblen’s construction of the concept. Generally speaking, cultural lag refers to the discrepancy between the socio-political structure and technological advances; to put it another way, it indicates a more retarded development of societal arts as compared with the advanced stage of technological arts. It is commonly held that our technology is developing and growing at such a high speed that our social relationships, for one reason or another, have not been able to keep pace in development. The implication is, of course, of a teleological nature. It assumes that the two ought to be “harmonized” in some fashion and that there is some force which causes the two to move in the same direction or towards the same ends, albeit at different rates of speed. It implies also that social development is similar to the technological process in that it contains within itself elements of dynamism. Is this true, and if so, to what extent? Diagrammatically this interpretation might appear in this manner:

---time---

socio-politico-economic structure, societal arts, adaptive or non-material culture

actual development lag

technology, science, technological arts, material culture

---actual development---

*The Work of Ogburn*

For perhaps the most extensive and definitive discussion of cultural lag, we can turn to the book, *Social Change*, by W. F. Ogburn, whose concept of cultural lag will be taken as the point of departure for this paper.

In analyzing the material culture or technology (in the narrow sense), Ogburn finds that there is a sort of inherent dynamism in the process of technological development, that material culture is accumulative, and that the number of different kinds of material culture objects is a factor in
determining the number of inventions of new objects. The section of the book which delves into cultural change deals, significantly, almost entirely with the process of change in the material culture.

Discussing the technological process, Ogburn says, "By definition, to invent is to contrive something new. But in trying to describe the particular new thing about the invented object, it is seen that the new thing is sometimes quantitatively inconspicuous in comparison with the amount of old in such a newly invented object. It is rather the putting together of certain appliances that is new" (p. 88).

"The first point to be observed (about the growth of material culture) is that material culture accumulates." (p. 73). This cumulative aspect is due to two features of the cultural process; one is the persistence of cultural forms, and the other is the addition of new forms (p. 74). "A certain general dependence (of inventions) on the cultural antecedents is easily seen" (p. 82).

"As to the causes of the changes in the rate of this accumulation, it is thought a most important factor is the extent at any one time of the existing material culture. It would seem that the larger the equipment of material culture the greater the number of inventions. The more there is to invent with, the greater the number of inventions" (p. 104).

In contrast, the part of Ogburn's book which is devoted to a discussion of cultural inertia is concerned largely with the non-material culture, i.e. superstitions, beliefs, customs. And in seeking a developmental process in this field similar to that process in the material culture, Ogburn concludes, "The inevitable series of stages in the development of social institutions has not only not been proven but has been disproven. The attempts to find laws of heredity, variation, and selection in the evolution of social institutions have produced few results either vital or significant" (p. 57). Evidently the field of non-material culture is peculiarly subject to a conditioning force entirely different from that present in the area of material culture; this will become more apparent in the section dealing with Veblen.

The survival of non-material features of culture is attributed to psychological need, although "it does not follow, of course, that the psychological need creates the cultural form; nor indeed that only one cultural form will satisfy a particular desire" (p. 155). Other reasons that Ogburn advances for cultural inertia are a hostility towards the new and a respect for tradition embodied in the mores, habit (both cultural and psychological aspects), ignorance, vested interests, socially enforced conformity to group standards, the psychological element of fear which causes re-
sistance to change, and the rather dubious reason that cultural forms may be inert because of a continuing utility.

Turning more specifically to the phenomenon of cultural lag, Ogburn sets forth the problem clearly, "The various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate, some parts are changing much more rapidly than others; and that since there is a correlation and interdependence of parts, a rapid change in one part of our culture requires readjustments through other changes in the various correlated parts of culture. . . . Where one part of culture changes first, through some discovery or invention, and occasions changes in some part of culture dependent upon it, there frequently is a delay in the changes occasioned in the dependent part of culture" (pp. 200–1). Ogburn illustrates this by examples showing, first, changes in the material culture and then the lag before corresponding changes in the non-material or adaptive culture occur. "Another point to observe is that the changes in the material culture precede changes in the adaptive culture. . . . It may be true that the old adaptive culture is never wholly adjusted to the new conditions" (pp. 211–2). On this point, Veblen was more emphatic: "Institutions are products of the past process, are adapted to past circumstances, and are therefore never in full accord with the requirements of the present."^1

To borrow a bit from L. L. Bernard, the structure of society or the cultural complex may be illustrated somewhat as follows:^2

![Diagram of cultural levels]

On the lower social levels, there is direct, basic adjustment by man to his natural environment and technological arts (i.e. material culture) are dominant, but the higher the structure rises, the more societal arts predominate and the greater is the uncertainty as to the "correctness" of the adjustment. The higher levels are increasingly derivative adjustments, and at the top, institutions may be considered as abstract adjustments to

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^1 Thorstein Veblen, Theory of the Leisure Class, p. 191.
previous lower level adjustments, the meaning of which may have been largely lost in the complex of society. It may be said that the difficulties of adjustment to the environment in the upper levels leads to cultural lag.

What are the reasons for or causes of this cultural lag? Ogburn lists and discusses six general reasons (p. 257 ff):

1. Scarcity of invention in the adaptive culture—For example, in the field of government there is a “marked lack of inventiveness.” Pensions, workmen’s compensation, and the like are examples of what Ogburn calls inventions in the adaptive culture.

2. Mechanical obstacles to adaptive changes—The time it takes to propagandize new ideas and get them adopted by the government. Other mechanical obstacles are habit, love of the past, and various utilities of the old culture.

3. The heterogeneity of society—The need for change in the adaptive culture may be felt by only one class, whereas the change must be made by society as a whole. Vested interests and the resulting class conflicts are important in this consideration.

4. The closeness of contact with material culture—The relationship between the adaptive culture and the material culture is not very close, but several steps removed (see preceding chart). For example, government is farther removed from the material culture than is the organization of industry.

5. The connection of the adaptive culture with other parts of culture—If adaptive culture x is related to another part of adaptive culture y as well as to material culture z, then if z changes and y does not change, then x will be more slow to change than would be true if it were not correlated with y.

6. Group valuations—“Customs become mores because of the strong approval of them as a policy by the group. . . . There is group pressure to enforce conformity. These emotional values of group approval appear to be forces resisting change.”

Since “social organization, customs, and morals are the means of a collective way of doing things, in large part to and with the natural environment and material culture . . . such methods of behavior would therefore presumably change if the material culture or natural environment changed” (p. 271). The present rapidity of material change means that it is significant as a cause of social phenomena.

To restate the elements involved in this problem, Ogburn finds the frequency of change in material culture due to the cumulative nature of inventions and techniques. Some parts of the non-material culture (religion) have no such cumulative nature, while other parts (art, literature, government) are cumulative but to a lesser extent than the material culture.
Inadequacies of the Sociological Theory of Cultural Lag

The above is as clear a formulation of the problem or question of social change and cultural lag as can be found anywhere in the literature on the subject. Even so, it leaves untouched some very significant, more basic problems and issues. For example, why is there a "marked lack of inventiveness" in the field of government? Why does it take time to spread new ideas in the field of societal arts and get them adopted? How are vested interests enabled to become vested interests in the first place? Why do customs become mores? What is the nature of the hostility towards the new in non-material culture, and why the respect for tradition? Why are some parts of the non-material culture of a cumulative nature and why are others not of a cumulative nature? In other words, what lies back of the reasons and causes advanced by Ogburn and others to explain cultural lag? Perhaps the foregoing questions are all more or less related; maybe there is another approach to the problem, a more basic one, if you will, which can furnish an understanding of the questions left hanging by the usual approach. Such an approach would have to plunge to the very heart of the problem, dissecting thoroughly the nature of the social process. It is the main contention of this paper that the Veblenian or institutionalist approach does just that.

The Veblenian Contribution

Identification of the Basic Dichotomy

Writers such as John Gambs and Allan Gruchy have made mention of the part that the concept of cultural lag played in the socio-economic theory of Thorstein Veblen, and a study of the basic dichotomy—ceremonialism and technology—of Veblen’s analyses reveals the important contribution which Veblen made to the theory of cultural lag. His approach, being different from that of Ogburn, is, I believe, more comprehensive and answers those questions left unconsidered by that writer’s treatment of the subject. While a complete theory in itself, the Veblenian approach can be used in conjunction with the foregoing analysis for a more complete understanding of cultural phenomena, but it must be kept in mind that what is meant by cultural lag in Veblen’s works is not exactly the same thing that has been described above. Indeed, the term is somewhat misleading as its implication is a process rather different from that which is examined throughout Veblen’s books and essays—vestigial ceremonial remnants might be a more accurate term.

Simply for ease of logical presentation, we shall start with a brief dis-
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Discussion of the basic Veblenian dichotomy, technology and ceremonialism, which is unmistakable in all of his major works and which runs like a unifying thread from the early essays and reviews which preceded The Theory of the Leisure Class through even the translation of The Laxdaela Saga. On one side, the area of technology, lie peaceable pursuits, industrial activity, the impersonal and matter-of-fact point of view, industrial capital or the state of the industrial arts, the machine process, and workmanship; the corresponding aspects of ceremonialism may be designated as predatory or aggressive pursuits, pecuniary activity, the animistic point of view, business capital, investment for profit, and exploitation. Yet in spite of the emphasis this dichotomy receives (one might almost say that it is the sum and substance of Veblen's work), the frequency with which it is overlooked and ignored by even serious readers of Veblen is incredible. All too often they have been distracted by his irony and literary style and have thought of Veblen as primarily a social satirist. But it is this recognition (by Veblen) of the two distinctive aspects of the social complex which furnishes the explanation of social lag.

Technology is conceived as referring to "the material interests of the community, including a social organization adapted to its exigencies, rather than to mere physical process; and the term technicians means not merely the engineers of a factory, but those intellectual leaders impersonally concerned with these material interests. . ."3 Thus technology includes not only tools but also the "tool ways" of the community, the dynamic cumulative nature of the technological process, the effect of the machine process upon human behavior, particularly those classes intimately associated with the machine process, the views of modern science with its axiom of cumulative causation and the impersonal causal sequence. Thus technology in this broad sense includes not only material culture, but overlaps into what has been variously designated as non-material culture, societal arts, and adaptive culture. Technology is cumulative (see Ogburn on the cumulative nature of material culture) and hence grows or develops.

On the other hand, ceremonialism must be analysed in terms of status, mores, habits, customs, rites, sacred beliefs, fetishes, force, power, coercion, emotion, religion, mythology, and superstition. It is based on the "personal, animistic point of view which belongs to the pre-Darwin stage of the natural sciences. Its ultimate axiom is an uncritical natural law which inscrutably coerces the course of events, the efficient causes, to achieve the legitimate end, which is the ideal of conduct accepted by the dominant

3 Joseph Dorfman, Thorstein Veblen and His America, p. 192.
common sense. This preconception of natural law, or legitimate end, has taken various forms—the Creator, the unseen hand, overruling providence, a harmony of interests, propensity or tendency in events, natural rights, natural order, normal order, a meliorative trend in events, a teleological order, final causes, uniformities of nature." In the social structure, ceremonialism finds expression in the coercive nature of received (and thus "sacred") dogmas, traditions, and institutions. Whereas technological patterns are a simple continuation of process, ceremonial patterns are backward-looking, deriving their authority and sanction from the past and at the same time existing to fulfill ultimate ends projected into the future. In ceremonialism there is not to be found any developmental process similar to that in technology.\(^5\)

What of the relationship between these two aspects of the totality of social structure? First of all, while technology is constantly changing cumulatively, the function of ceremonialism is inherently static or change-resistant. Ceremonialism adheres to the past and does not respond to change as does technology. In so far as ceremonialism affects technology, it impinges upon it, impedes its application, and otherwise restricts man's use of technology to increase his material welfare. The effect of technology upon ceremonialism is, however, held to be of quite a different nature. There is, as it were, a process of attenuation of ceremonialism with the advance of technology. "Veblen points out that changes in industrial technology result in a decay of old-fashioned habits of thought based on an animistic or anthropomorphic interpretation of the external world. Technology has a 'corrosive touch' which destroys habits of thought based on romantic notions of the nature of the external world and on traditional acceptance of differences in human rank. Those who are in contact with this changing technology substitute for the old-fashioned habits of thought new mental habits which are supported by matter-of-fact knowledge of the external world."\(^6\) This process is described at length in Chapter IX of *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. The cultural incidence of the machine process occurs in the round-about process of the growth of enlightenment, i.e. the impact of knowledge acquired through the machine process on received traditions. While John Gambs in *Beyond Supply and Demand* has severely criticized Veblen regarding the cultural incidence of the ma-

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\(^5\) Definitive treatment of the nature of ceremonialism and technology has been omitted in order not to digress too far from the main topic of the paper. Similarly, extensive quotation from Veblen has not been used. Rather, references will be made to the books where certain ideas in this paper have been expounded by Veblen in great detail.

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Machine process, he (Gambs) indicates that he is interpreting in a very restricted and narrow sense, a version which seems unjustified by a reading of Veblen’s work. In contrast to the diagram of social lag presented earlier in the paper, we might represent the technology-ceremonialism relationship in this manner:

![Diagram of social lag]

What, then, is cultural lag? Gruchy explains it thus, “In working out his concept of class organization, Veblen introduces the concepts of the cultural lag and class conflict. According to his theory of culture the most important single factor that alters institutions, and hence human behavior, is technological change. However, all people and all classes are not equally exposed to the changing technological conditions. That portion or class of society that is less exposed to the forces of technological change adapts its views and scheme of life to the altered technological conditions more slowly than the class which is more directly exposed to the changing technology. There are thus set up different rates of mental adjustment to the new economic conditions. As a consequence of these different rates of psychological adjustment, cultural lags make their appearance . . . (in) the form of differences in the cultural standards that provide guidance to individual behavior.”  

In the chapter, “The Conservation of Archaic Traits,” in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen explores this concept of cultural lag thoroughly, and in this particular instance, the leisure class which at present is engaged in pecuniary, exploitive pursuits may be spoken of as a cultural lag.

Using a different approach, Gambs finds in Veblen’s work the concept of a sort of social Gestalt in which individual behavior, economic action, and social organization move together in a certain harmony or congruence. But “it is admitted that today’s Gestalt may contain left-over elements from yesterday’s Gestalt. Thus, there can be culture lags, and these culture lags may be of great significance.”  

However, “though any stage...

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7 Ibid., p. 78.
8 John Gambs, *Beyond Supply and Demand*, p. 25.
or form of social organization permits change or variation and tolerates vestiges of past cultural patterns (culture lags), the dominating theme remains the same (the Gestalt)."9 The feudalism of Japan and Germany (a culture lag from a previous Gestalt) combined with the modern industrial regime introduced into those nations resulted in "excessive incongruities" in their Gestalts, the theme of *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*.

In both of these cases—the analyses of Gruchy and Gambs—the cultural lag is of a ceremonial character involving status, coercion, and related features. As mentioned before, the term "lag" is somewhat of a misnomer, and remnant or vestige would perhaps be more accurate. But at any rate it is evident that the key to cultural lag is that it is a case of ceremonial persistence, of intransigent institutional behavior patterns. Now with this point clearly in mind, we can return to the several questions left unanswered earlier. It will be seen that all of the problem situations posed there have in common the characteristic attributes of ceremonialism. For example, there is a "marked lack of inventiveness" in the field of government because received forms of government are particularly tied up with status, power, and coercion, and in the romantic point of view, there is traditionally an intangible "sacredness" of inherited governmental institutions whether this sacredness rests upon divine right or natural rights. Similarly, vested interests come to be vested through ceremonial status arrangements and institutions which perpetuate hierarchically structures. The fact that some parts of the non-material culture are of a non-cumulative nature lies in their ceremonial character, while other parts of the non-material culture are cumulative because they are, at least in part, of a technological character.

In conclusion, Veblen's contribution to the theory of cultural lag lies in his keen analysis of the basic dichotomy of the social complex—technology and ceremonialism—an analysis which goes far beyond the usual studies of the phenomenon of cultural lag and deals with the underlying aspects of society. And an almost equal contribution of Veblen was his unparalleled recognition of the significance of this concept for the field of economics, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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**The Blight of Bureaucracy in State Government**

A major problem of government, as well as of big business, is to find a way of restoring to competent officials not only responsibility but authority as well. If our state institutions are to attract outstanding leadership, New York must regain the crusading spirit that inspired so many of her administrators in the past.

John E. Burton, former director of the budget, sums up the matter in two short sentences:

> Keep the duties of administration as much as possible in the hands of the people who spend the money. This makes not only for efficiency, but also for responsibility.

On May 4, 1914, Gov. Martin H. Glynn called the Legislature of the State of New York in extraordinary session to concentrate upon the question of state finances. On May 6 of that year, Herbert F. Prescott, deputy fiscal adviser of state charities, made a report to the extraordinary session on "Conflict of Authority and Laws Concerning Charitable Institutions of the State." In that report he stated in part:

The present interlocking system of department control of public institutions in the state is expensive, confusing, and inefficient. Initiative is smothered in a mass of red tape.

Department has been piled upon department until the mass is top heavy with extravagance.

An army of clerks is required in state institutions to carry on correspondence with over twenty departments, many of which would be entirely unnecessary if the system of administration were put on a business basis.

There are today more state departments assisting in running these charitable institutions than there are institutions, and their powers, duties and responsibilities are so interlocked that the transaction of institutional business is very slow and very expensive (Assembly Document No. 2, May 6, 1914).

Our state government has been completely reorganized since 1914. Today we cannot possibly have more state departments supervising the fifty-eight institutions than there are institutions to supervise, because there are now only nineteen departments. Thanks largely to former Gov. Alfred E. Smith and former Gov. Charles Evans Hughes, who headed the executive committee appointed by the State Reorganization Commission in 1926, the

* From the 42d annual report of the board of visitors of Letchworth Village, Utica, N. Y., State Hospitals Press, 1951, pp. 116–19.