

Chapter One

The Parable of the Tribes

1 Introduction

For Western man, the progress of understanding has been a humbling experience. At the dawn of the modern era, the heliocentric revolution in astronomy evicted man¹ from his privileged home at the center of the universe, consigning him instead to a tiny planet of what turns out to be a minor star. That left man nonetheless a special being among the creatures of the earth, a quintessence of dust fashioned specially by the Lord of the Universe in His own image. But this gratifying self-image was forever altered in the nineteenth century by the theory of biological evolution that revealed man's fundamental kinship and continuity with other living things. Still, man in his pride could point to his unique nature, to the spark of divine reason which ordered his life, elevated him from his own animality, and entitled him to dominion over the world. Then, at the beginning of this century, the brilliant insights of psychoanalysis showed how thin is the veil of consciousness and rationality, how dominated man is by an unconscious animal self, how man is not master even in his own house.

1. The word "man" here refers to the human species generally. It is used because our language makes it convenient, and is not intended to imply that women have played a lesser role in human life.

One fortress of our pride has remained. Whatever man's shortcomings as a creature, there can be no doubting man's powers as a Creator. In the globe-spanning structures of civilization, behold his works!

Now comes the parable of the tribes, a theory to illuminate the nature and determinants of civilization. It shows that even in those structures where man's power and ability are most tangibly embodied—even in the evolution of civilization—man is as much the victim as the master.

2. Understanding Change

There *is* something special about the human animal. Of all the earth's creatures, we are the creators of change. After ten thousand years of steadily accelerating transformations, virtually all the life on this planet is now caught up in the destiny of the creature with the unique ability to invent his way of life.

That mankind has the power to transform the conditions of life for ourselves and other creatures does not mean we understand the powers we exercise. Just as human hearts beat for aeons before the circulation of the blood was understood, so the forces that drive the stream of change in human social life could come from us yet escape our comprehension.

People often do not recognize, much less grasp, the effects of their actions. Four thousand years ago (as Geoffrey Bibby describes in a book of that title) change in civilized societies was so gradual that people thought that life had always been as it was then. The question of explaining change hardly arose in their minds. Yet they were actively (if inadvertently) effecting one of the great revolutions in the history of life—the evolution of civilization. Change that was cataclysmic by the standards of life's previous development was nonetheless too slow to be visible in the perspective of a single lifetime.

Now, change has so quickened that one cannot help but witness dramatic metamorphoses in civilized societies. Before our eyes, ancient tribal groups are being welded into nations. Whole societies adopt new forms of social and economic organization. Intellectual revolutions and technological innovations constantly alter people's methods of production, transportation, housing. Traditional values and ideologies all over the world are altered or overthrown as they encounter new and unexpected conditions.

History's acceleration has made manifest what has been true from the beginning of civilization: the structure of life for civilized peoples has been constantly subject to profound changes as new cultural ways are developed and replace the old. We can see now that civilization is an evolving system.

The question is: what determines the direction in which civilization evolves? It is a vital question, for if we are shaping our destiny without comprehension, how likely is it we will shape it well? For our powers to exceed our understanding is dangerous. What is remarkable about this question besides its fundamental importance is the paucity of attention it receives. There seem to be two principal reasons for this neglect: (1) some do not search for an answer because they believe none can exist; and (2) some do not search for an answer because they assume they already know it.

(1) In an age of specialized analysis, there is a prejudice against general questions and general answers: the study of forests is considered best pursued as the study of particular trees. Even as pictures from satellites open our eyes to sweeping vistas, our world view tends to be myopically mired in the magnifying-glass stage. The parts are delineated in excruciating detail, whereas the whole is left for some invisible hand to assemble or is regarded as no more than the sum of its parts.

Admittedly, it may be that no general explanation can illuminate the transformations of human life over the ten thousand years of civilization. The reasons for change might be wholly different from one time and place to another. Perhaps history must remain the museum of the unique that most present historians claim it to be.

If we nonetheless persist in seeking to explain the overall thrust of history, it may profit us to ask: what kind of idea might conceivably be able to encompass so vast and diverse a panorama as the history of the development of civilization? An admirable precedent lies before us: the Darwinian theory of biological evolution. In an era growing newly aware that living systems are changing and not fixed, Charles Darwin created a most satisfying theory for explaining an evolutionary process. His idea is elegant and comprehensive. All it requires are two things: a *diversity* of alternative forms and a systematic process of *selection* among those alternatives according to some consistent criteria. Once genetic theory could account for the generation of alternative forms, Darwin's concept of natural selection could, in a single brilliant stroke, illuminate one of the deepest mysteries of the universe. By constant operation over innumerable generations, natural selection could mold the indescribable complexity of the phenomena of life; the generality of its application did not violate the uniqueness of the particular living structure.

The concept of selection—combining great simplicity and extraordinary explanatory power—is doubtless one of the magnificent intellectual creations of the human mind. Moreover, such a concept offers the best hope of giving us an elegant and parsimonious explanation of far-reaching changes in complex systems. Although the past one and a half centuries have produced various theories of what has been called “social

evolution," very few have been evolutionary theories in that most essential Darwinian sense of postulating a process of selection among alternatives to account for the overall trends in the evolution of civilized societies. The goal of this work is to find such a clarifying evolutionary theory for the development of civilization.

(2) An evolutionary theory of sorts is already present in the minds of many. Therein lies the second reason why the pursuit of a general theory of civilization's evolution is not more energetic: why search for what one already has? To many people, change seems explicable by a commonsense theory, one so obvious in fact that it generally remains implicit rather than stated outright. I now present briefly this commonsense explanation. Understanding the drama of our social evolution is too important a matter to be left in the dim light of unstated assumptions.

3. The Common Sense: Selection by Human Choice

This commonsense theory of social evolution offers a benign and reasonable view of human affairs. According to this image, people are continually hunting for ways to better their condition. (One immediately recognizes the Economic Man of capitalist theory.) The alternatives are readily generated by this pursuit of improvement. The longer the hunt goes on, the more alternatives are discovered. And, since man is an inventive as well as exploratory creature, what is discovered in the world is increasingly supplemented by what people have created. With the passage of time, therefore, more and more cultural alternatives become available for all aspects of our cultural business—how and what to produce, how to govern ourselves, what to think, how to travel, play, make music, and so on. The process of selection is done by people. The criterion for selection? People choose what they believe will best meet their needs, replacing old cultural forms when new and better ones become available. Again, the resonance with economic theory is striking: social evolution is the product of choices made in the marketplace of cultural possibilities.

This theory can be aptly illustrated by the development of a cuisine. In the beginning, people are surrounded by plants and animals of unknown nutritive value and taste. Over the course of time, everything gets tried. People learn from their experience. They remember what tasted good, what was poisonous, even what diet made them feel healthy. They experiment with new combinations, new ways of preparing, storing, and curing foods. Constantly, they select for the most satisfying cuisine. As people from one region contact people from another, they exchange ideas

and ingredients. Each group now benefits from the other's recipes, and altogether new recipes come into being as new combinations of foods become possible—one group's nuts are traded for another's herbs, citrus comes to the New World as the tomato is taken to the Old. Selection continually generates improvement.

Despite all the buffeting the modern Western notion of progress has received since 1914, the assumption that history is about progress remains strongly embedded in our consciousness. This commonsense evolutionary theory is part of that assumption. Each generation has more options to choose among, and more collective experience upon which to base its choices. Each can improve upon the heritage it receives. The story of civilization can be seen as *The Great Ascent*.

The reader no doubt suspects that I have set up this theory of social evolution by human choice only as a straw man to be struck down. Of course this is true—but only in part. Like most commonsense ideas it captures an important truth.

This model of selection can account for much of the development and spread of new components of civilized culture. In part, culture is indeed a kind of market in which new possibilities—in making pottery, in telephone service, in musical expressions, in vaccinations—replace or supplement old because people want them. Without making any pre-judgment about the nature and complexity of human wants, we may grant that choices based on those wants are important in determining the way our cultural systems evolve.

But this benign model of social evolution suffers from a fundamental problem. If such a process has governed the evolution of civilization, how are we to explain why human life under civilization has not been better?

4. The Rube Goldberg Problem: A Critique of the Commonsense Theory

The commonsense theory of selection by human choice leads one to expect a continuous betterment of the human condition. For a story of improvement, however, the history of civilization makes rather dismal reading, and as the culmination of ten thousand years of progress the twentieth century is deeply disappointing. It is not simply that history is strewn with regrettable events, with accidents leaving carnage and wreckage on the thoroughfare bound for Progress. The road itself has been treacherous. If the stupendous historical transformation in the structure of human life has been the result of people choosing what they believe will best satisfy their needs, why have not human needs been better met?

The idea of history as progress is itself of relatively recent origin. And those who endorse that idea are usually looking only at relatively recent history for support. Compare premodern Europe with contemporary Western societies, the argument goes. Have we not come a long way from those dingy and bloody days of superstition, plague, despotism, and poverty? But even the advances of modern civilization have their nightmarish side, escalating as they have the destructive capacities of civilization. We look with mounting apprehension at the weapons of thermonuclear warfare, at the repressive apparatus of the totalitarian state, and at the disruptions of the ecological flows upon which life on earth depends. And even if we embrace modernization as progress, this stretch of history is but a small fraction of the total span of civilization. Looking at history as a whole, it is far from clear that the main "advances" of civilized societies have consistently improved the human condition. In earlier eras of history, the cutting edge of civilization's progress led from freedom into bondage for the common person. The great monuments of the ancient world were built with the sweat of slaves whose civilized ancestors had not known the oppressor's whip. After four thousand years the pyramids of Egypt can still stand as an emblem of the problem of civilization, that its achievements are more reliably impressive than benign.

If the same forces have driven social evolution throughout history, and if the way has been downhill at some times and uphill at others, we should not be sanguine that any recent trends toward progress point to the meaning of our destiny.

The idea of progress has relied in another way on the lack of a clear vision of the distant past. The life of primitive peoples is widely assumed to have been nasty, brutish, and short. The step from the "savage" state to the "civilized" is consequently assumed to have been straight up. Increasingly, however, as anthropologists have taken a closer and less ethnocentric look at hunter-gatherers, the evidence has shown that primitive life was not so bad. Primitive societies, a category confined in this book to simple hunting-and-gathering peoples, provide an important point of reference for two reasons: they give a perspective on civilization by showing the human condition that civilization has transformed; and they help to illuminate our nature as a species, for they show the kind of life we are biologically evolved to lead.

Without romanticizing the primitive condition into a paradise without ills, we must nonetheless appreciate that modern primitives (and, by an inferential leap, our primitive ancestors) led a surprisingly humane existence. Among hunting-and-gathering bands, the burden of labor is comparatively small, leaving more time than most civilized peoples have known for play, music, dance. The politics of these small societies are

largely free of coercion and inequality. Relationships are close and enduring. Primitives enjoy a wholeness and freedom in their lives which many civilized peoples may well envy.²

This new view of our starting point demands a new look at the entire course. If we lift our vision of primitive life out of the degradation to which civilized mythology has consigned it, the commonsense view of social evolution becomes more difficult to sustain. Even if we grant that ten thousand years have improved the human condition, there seems something disturbingly disproportionate between the immensity of the changes that ten millennia of social evolution have wrought upon human societies, and the small (even debatable) advances in human well-being. If we were to persist in viewing the great edifice of civilization as structured for the purpose of meeting human needs, civilization would seem to be a gigantic Rube Goldberg contraption. Rube Goldberg's machines were comic because of the grotesque mismatch between means and ends—like a structure the size of a house to light a cigarette, or a twenty-eight-step process for waking someone up in the morning. If we view social evolution as the result of people continually choosing better ways to meet their needs, civilization becomes a kind of joke.

But before we are reconciled to this vision of history as ludicrous, we should see whether the commonsense theory of social evolution can somehow survive the evidence that the progress of human well-being has been both inconsistent and disappointing.

One possible way of meeting the challenge is to argue that when people choose they do not necessarily choose wisely. Whether one attributes the limits of human judgment to folly or to sin, people evidently often make choices hurtful to themselves. Smokers keep smoking, fat people keep overeating, procrastinators avoid necessary tasks, and few of us are as good to those we love as we would like to be. Saint Paul saw it as central to the human condition that we cannot follow even our own best judgment. And, of course, even our best judgment may not be very good:

2. The idea that the life of hunter-gatherers may be a particularly satisfying one for human beings is explored further in chap. 2, "Unfree Choices," and again in chap. 4, "The Question of Human Nature" and "Eden." The freedom of hunting-and-gathering peoples from warfare of the sort that has plagued civilized history is a focal point in chap. 3, "Red Sky at Morning," and is dealt with also in chap. 2, "The Mother of Invention," and chap. 5, "Fighting Mad." In chap. 3, in the three "Evolution" sections, the original size and structure of primitive societies are juxtaposed with the subsequent metamorphoses effected by civilization. Part of that picture ("Evolution toward More Effective Central Control") portrays the egalitarian nature of primitive political relations, a subject treated again in chap. 7, "Men Are Not Ants." That the economic life of primitives is not so beset by drudgery and the feeling of privation as many have imagined is discussed in chap. 5, "Under the Yoke." In several places in chap. 5, ways are described in which hunter-gatherers enjoy a wholeness and peacefulness of mind often subverted by civilized life. (The anthropological sources for the arguments are noted in the text.) The reason for this way of drawing the boundary between primitive and civilized is touched upon again in chap. 3, "Red Sky at Morning."

we build high rises on hurricane coasts and on earthquake faults, we trust deceptive and hypocritical politicians, we exhaust our soils, we ingest pathogenic chemicals. . . . So it should not be surprising if the course of civilization is full of blunders—political arrangements that become oppressive, economic systems that lead to famine, social organizations that produce anomie.

One can add to the shortcomings of the human decision maker the extraordinary difficulty of these decisions. For the progress of civilization has been a continuous advance into uncharted territory. Even the wisest judge needs precedents, and civilized peoples have repeatedly been compelled to deal with unprecedented problems. Even intelligent people, under those circumstances, will adopt solutions which do not work or which work today but sow the seeds of tomorrow's problems. Irrigation brings a miracle of greenness in the short run but leads eventually to the disastrous spread of deserts over salted soils. People are attracted to the manifest abundance economic modernization can provide but may not realize the costs in social disruption and fragmentation that development may entail. In the marketplace of social evolutionary possibilities, the payment due is not always calculable until long after the contract for "progress" has been made.

Both these ideas are valuable for understanding the problematic aspect of human destiny. People do indeed sometimes choose foolishly. And at the frontiers of social evolution people are faced with the difficult challenge of finding their way through uncharted, unexplored territory. These answers, however, do not seem sufficient to solve the problem posed by civilization's ills. The intelligence and industry of our ancestors is simply too impressive to allow us to load the failures of civilization to meet human needs onto their supposedly blundering choices. When we scrutinize what our ancestors in any given time and place were able to do with their situation, what generally stands out is not their folly but their soundness and their resourcefulness.

Something important is missing from the picture. It is like some problems that have arisen in the history of astronomy. What is visible fails to explain how the heavenly bodies are moving, so astronomers search for an invisible source of the disturbing force. Another body is presumed to exist even if it has not yet been seen, for its gravitational pull is manifest. Such is the gravity of the pull of civilization's evolution from the course of human welfare that we must posit a kind of social evolutionary black hole to account for the wide disparity between the expected and the actual movement of our systems.

It is time now to begin moving toward a new theory. We must go beyond the visible force of human actors making choices to discover a

force more hidden yet powerful enough to warp the course of social evolution. Although the commonsense theory would lead us to expect history to bring the fulfillment of human dreams, one can as aptly call history a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken. Why?

5. Toward a Bigger Vision

The problem in comprehending the destiny of civilized man is that our vision does not readily encompass the magnitude of the drama.

The experience of a lifetime gives an inadequate perspective. Unlike Bibby's ancients of four thousand years ago, we can see change. But we have difficulty seeing what is constant amid the change. We were born into a vehicle already far along on an extended trajectory so that our present experience is intelligible only in terms of forces that acted in the past.

Of course, we have historical knowledge to supplement our contemporary experience. For the most part, however, the perspective of history has tended to reinforce rather than to correct a vital blind spot. That blind spot is our tendency to take civilization as a given, that is, to view our species' story as if we were somehow born to the civilized state, as if like Athena we had sprung fully armed into being. For many centuries, the study of our history meant the study of previous civilized societies. To look at where we began has been to look at ancient civilizations.

Starting with the wrong assumptions as given, we end with asking the wrong questions. Human beings, born into life, have always tended to regard death as the big mystery. But in an overwhelmingly lifeless universe, the dead is the given and the life we take for granted is the deep mystery. Being born into the conditions of civilization leads people into a similar error about what is the given and what in need of explanation.

History, then, has traditionally not allowed our vision to transcend the civilized condition that needs explaining. But in the last century or so, the perspective of "natural history" has revealed to us how extremely truncated is that old view of time. Our infancy was not in the cradle of civilization, but far, far back before then. Our human ancestors go back hundreds of thousands, perhaps several millions of years. But our ancestry is still more ancient. Our story, as much as that of any creatures on earth, goes back to the beginning of life, more than three billion years ago. Walking a time line of the earth's history overwhelms our provincial sense of time. From the earth's beginning to the point where life emerges is a number of paces. It is a long walk before mammals have appeared, but only a few steps from there to the appearance of the human animal.

The time of recorded history is scarcely visible. What we call history is like a period at the end of the long story of life on earth.

All this is now "common knowledge," but in most of us that knowledge remains only superficially integrated into our vision of ourselves. Old preconceptions die slowly. It is no longer intellectually respectable to believe the human story began six thousand years ago in some garden in the Middle East. But even a century and a half after Darwin's voyage, this cataclysmic change in our knowledge has hardly influenced most of our thinking about human destiny. Although many fine minds work at this process of intellectual integration, we have not yet grasped the full implications of the more grounded and complete perspective. This task remains central in the human search for self-understanding.

The larger vision is, in particular, indispensable to solving the problem we are investigating here. This work shows how the key to the mystery of civilization's problematic course lies in the extraordinary fact of the emergence of our species from biological evolution into a new kind of evolution.

To understand the world as we find it, we must go back to the world as it began. In the beginning . . .

6. The Way of Life

Out of matter and energy obeying natural laws, there emerged life. Whence came the stuff of the universe and the laws to govern its behavior are matters for speculation beyond the scope of my inquiry. Given them, the emergence of life seems to have required simply the proper conditions, and time. By chance, certain aggregations of matter emerged which had the ability to persist and to replicate themselves. The implications of this reproductive capacity for selection over time are obvious. Those aggregations with the ability to increase will begin as an infinitesimal proportion of the total system, but will grow steadily compared with the static (inanimate) configurations of matter. Life gets a foothold in the early stages because the living is selected over the nonliving.

For living things to persist, or survive, their environment must provide them with the substances and energy they need to maintain and to reproduce themselves. As life grows denser, the environment on which each organism depends consists increasingly of other living things. The survival of each, therefore, comes to depend upon how well all the others maintain crucial flows of materials and energy throughout the system. Life requires environmental reliability. The implications for natural se-

lection are clear. Selection molds not just individual species but entire ecological communities, favoring those combinations of creatures that most reliably act synergistically to maintain the flows on which all the creatures depend. As life developed on this planet, the networks of interdependence and cooperation expanded until some of the major flows became global in scope. The earth's atmosphere as we know it is a product of the living ecosystem.

Biological evolution is, of course, the story of change, but stability is one of its most important products. The regularity of events supports the health of life, whereas the unpredictable and unprecedented threaten it. The living emerged out of the nonliving and remain vulnerable to changes inflicted by the inanimate processes of the universe. Thus, the regular rising and setting of the sun and the regular succession of the seasons form part of the pattern of life for earth's creatures. But the unpredictable variations in sunspot activity can injure the ecosystem. Life has not yet managed to make earth's climate completely reliable, and inanimately caused disturbances (such as ice ages, or atmospheric disruptions) may be the reasons for prehistoric waves of extinctions of species.

Genetic changes in living creatures have often been the consequence of the unexpected intrusion of inanimate forces, for example, cosmic radiation causing mutations. Because mutations have been an essential ingredient of biological evolution, it is sometimes forgotten that the overwhelming majority of mutations are injurious. The very few that are advantageous, however, are selected for and perpetuated while the many, many others disappear. Although living systems change, therefore, they resist change more than they incorporate it. The new forms spread very gradually, and only if time proves them consistent with the long-run survival not only of the individual but of the ecological balance on which his descendants will depend.

We can better understand biological evolution if we see it less as a process of change than as a creation of order. Natural selection has molded an order of indescribable complexity from the molecular level to the global. Each piece of the intricate pattern of life must play its specific and narrow role in the whole. This order is rigid but not coercive, for there is no governing power in the system. Each creature follows its own law, but that law itself has been written by an evolutionary process that secures the orderliness of the overarching system of life. Each creature is free in the sense that none of its impulses are prohibited. But it is a freedom without choice.

During the course of biological evolution, the behavioral rigidity of living things has become steadily less complete. An animal that can re-

spond to different situations differently has adaptive advantages. It is not that biological evolution has rejected the rigid in favor of the flexible, since the more mechanical life forms have remained abundant. Rather, certain niches in the ecosystem favor flexibility. The more complex and heterogeneous the environment an animal lives in, the better served it is by a wide behavioral repertoire and the ability to perceive what behavior is called for. That more flexible creatures like mammals have arisen late in the evolutionary process compared with the more rigid reptiles (not to mention still more primitive forms) is evidence not so much of superiority as of complexity and of the fact that greater complexity takes longer to evolve. Conceivably, such flexibility could be entirely programmed into the genes. Indeed, in insects some fairly elaborate discriminations are completely, or almost completely, genetically "wired." But after a certain level of complexity is reached, such an approach would be terribly cumbersome—worse than computers that play chess by considering every imaginable move at every point. Selection has therefore favored a more efficient route to behavioral flexibility—learning.

With the emergence of learning, the control of organismic behavior by genetic blueprints ceased to be absolute. A creature's own experience—not just the aeons of ancestral experience carved by selection into its genes—could now play some part in shaping how it acts in the world. The capacity to learn creates a new discontinuity between the living and the inanimate worlds. First came matter and energy obeying physical laws, then came organisms mechanically following laws inscribed by ages of evolution. The animal that can learn is something new in that the determinants of its behavior are not wholly created outside of itself. As long as genetic control remains absolute, the living present is wholly bound by the evolutionary past. With the emergence of learning, the present gains a degree of latitude to shape itself.

The emergence of learning many many millions of years ago, however, did not change the nature of the order that biological evolution had created. In retrospect we can see it as only a hairline crack in the tight structure of the living system. For one thing, the hereditary structure of the learning animal would itself greatly determine what was learned, channeling perceptions and predisposing the animal to certain lessons. A baby duck, for example, will imprint on the first object of the right size it sees moving in the right way after it is hatched. This example suggests one more reason why learning in animals did not really alter the basic reliability of animal behavior: the experiences in which learning would take place were in themselves quite predictable. A baby duck is virtually certain—in the absence of some experimenter's manipulations—

to imprint upon and subsequently follow its own mother. Harlow's experiments in depriving baby rhesus monkeys of their mothers has shown how significant for the monkey is the social learning it gets in its relationship with its mother. But in the monkey's natural environment, that learning will occur in very predictable ways in a reliable maternal relationship. What is learned, therefore, remained for millions of years an extension of what is genetically given. The two elements combined to form an essentially predictable animal nature that left intact the reliability of behavior on which the integrity of the natural order depends.

A hairline crack can always get wider. The escape from complete genetic programming, however slight at first, could always grow. However magnificent the Creation of biological evolution, without a Creator it cannot look forward. What is selected for is what has worked. The selective process does not "know" where a given evolutionary experiment will ultimately lead. For millions of years, the experiment with learning did not disrupt the essential continuity of biological evolution, the stability of the living order. But then the experiment created the great learning animal, man. Then learning created something new—the cultural animal.

7. The Emergence of Culture

Human learning has changed the world in a way the learning of other animals did not. This is not primarily because we are individually more intelligent than other individual animals, though we are. Rather it is because our intelligence has crossed that threshold where it becomes possible for us to pool our learning collectively and to transmit its fruits down through the generations. At that point, the capacity to learn became transmuted into the far more potent ability to create culture.

In the history of the theory of biological evolution, the most intense controversy was over the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Did the experience of one generation inform the genetic heritage of the next? Of course, this Lamarckian view was eventually rejected. With that rejection, the gains of experience became like a biological Sisyphean task—Sisyphus being the mythical figure whose task it was to roll a big rock up a hill only to have it roll back down and have his task begin anew. When a smart elephant dies, its knowledge dies with it, and its descendants must begin their learning from the beginning at the bottom of the hill. If we had no way to accumulate our learning, our intelligence would not significantly differentiate us from other animals. The human invention of culture at last allows learning to become cumulative. Some acquired char-

acteristics can at last be inherited, not genetically but through the transmission of information from one learning animal to another. The cumulative learning of a group of human beings is its culture.³

Culture opened a gap in the rigid regime of the living order. Gradually, over the last one or several million years, our ancestors widened the range within which human creativity, rather than human genetics, determined the way human life was lived. Tools were invented, manufactured, and used in the basic processes of life. Language and other symbolic forms were created for the communication and representation of experience. Like the beginnings of learning in the distant evolutionary past, the beginnings of culture were no doubt modest and unobtrusive. And as with learning, the success of the new experiment quickened its development. Over hundreds of thousands of years, culture and genetics acted together to reinforce this acceleration of cultural development. The selection for individuals whose hands were good at tool use led, over the generations, to the evolution of hands better suited to tool use. The advantages of those who could use language well led to brains and mouths better equipped for working with language. More and more the human animal enjoyed an unprecedented freedom. It could create its own way of life.

To some, the emergence of culture is the crucial point in the discontinuity between man and the other creatures. According to this view, if the first volume of our Natural History is to be called *The Physical World*, and the second *The Evolution of Life*, the third should be entitled *The Rise of Culture*. Culture introduced the capacity for freedom of choice onto the earth, and in this freedom lies the special destiny of mankind.

This focus on the importance of culture therefore harmonizes with the view of human destiny as governed by human choice. If we wish to solve the riddle of the special evils that seem to plague our efforts, it proposes, we must look to our special freedom to choose how we act in the world. The wolf may be cruel, but when it kills the lamb, the death of the lamb is not an injury to lambkind. It is part of the pattern of survival not only for wolves but for the sheep as well. But man the hunter, with the ungoverned creativity to employ fire and spear, was able to hunt its prey to extinction. After three billion years of life, the gap created by culture allowed into the world for the first time an unpredictable animal. As life had always depended upon a well-governed order to protect the

3. The findings of primatologists have revealed that in our capacity to create culture, as in so much else, our uniqueness is less than absolute. Macaque societies have proved themselves able to absorb into their collective culture the innovations of particular individuals; similarly, some chimpanzee groups have developed tool-using techniques to get into termite nests. Clearly, however, the differences in degree between these instances and the human use of culture amount to a difference in kind.

health of living systems, the emergence of an ungoverned creature can destabilize the regime. The creature with the freedom to choose can be dangerous—to himself, to others of his kind, to all life. A relatively recent experiment, this gift of freedom represented by culture may yet be rejected by biological evolution, selected against perhaps in a thermonuclear cloud inflicted upon the world by a few creatures using their freedom of choice insanely.

Mankind's problems still look like problems of freedom. If the evils of civilization pose a riddle, the solution would seem to be found in the myth in Genesis. There only the human animals, of all the earth's creatures, can sunder paradise because only they confront the choice between good and evil, between obedience to the surrounding order and disobedience.

But we have not finished with our story of the evolution from the dead stuff of the universe to the living systems of civilization.

8. The Breakthrough to Civilization

I have said that with culture human beings gained the freedom to create their own way of life. Before civilization, this was true only in a very limited sense. Among hunter-gatherers, culture might be seen more as an adornment on a structure of life reaching back to precultural times than as a radical departure from the biologically governed past. These primitive bands, in their size and structure and in their means of subsistence, maintained a fundamental kinship with the primate groups from which they emerged. In other words, despite the notion that the beginnings of culture represent the point of radical discontinuity between man and the rest of nature, our ancestors developed culture over hundreds of thousands of years without greatly disrupting the continuity in the relationships among individual, society, and the natural order. As long as human societies sustained their lives with the food that nature spontaneously provided, they could develop culturally only within strict limits.

Then came a major cultural innovation in the technology of subsistence. When plants and animals were domesticated, mankind began truly to depart from the place in the living order given it by nature. At first, some ten thousand years ago, the economy of domestication was merely an appendage to the ongoing hunting-and-gathering economy. Gradually, the new way of life supplanted the old. It took several millennia before the power of this breakthrough to usher in a new age became manifest. It was not just that man's role in the ecosystem was forever altered by his unprecedented power to rearrange the living system for his own purposes. Beyond that, the new abundance brought about by

developing agriculture made possible open-ended changes in the previously fixed size and structure of human society. Except in a few extraordinary locations, a hunting-and-gathering society was by necessity a small, fairly mobile group. The rise of agriculture made possible a more settled life with far larger populations living in the same territory under a single social organization. Since the labor of a few could now feed many, an extensive division of labor became possible. The breakthrough in food production cleared the way for the rise of civilization. From the narrowly circumscribed conditions of primitive social life, suddenly all things seem to become possible for the cultural animal.

It is therefore not culture per se which marks the point of discontinuity evident in the unfolding of human destiny, but a particular stage of cultural development—civilization. Civilization is here defined as that stage or subset of cultural evolution which begins with the innovations of domestication, that is, with the shift from food gathering to food production. The rise of culture was, of course, a prerequisite for the rise of civilization, but the development of culture in itself did not imply a radical change in human life. Just as the emergence of learning opened a crack through which culture could ultimately stream through, so did culture open a small gap through which could eventually gush the remarkable transformations of the evolution of civilization.

The possibilities for change became open-ended. The biologically evolved constraints suddenly were removed, and the mushrooming forth of new civilized social structures could and did occur.

With all things apparently possible, it is disturbing to see what actually developed. In the five thousand years following the first steps out of the hunter-gatherer way of life, full-scale civilization arose and showed a frightening face. The social equality of primitives gave way to rigid stratification, with the many compelled to serve the few. Warfare became far more important, more chronic, and more bloody and destructive. And the new dominion of man over nature had already begun to turn the green mantle that covered the birthplace of civilization into a rough and rocky desert.

Once again we confront the ills of civilization, and again the drama looks like one of freedom abused. If culture is freedom, civilization seems to be the same freedom greatly magnified. To this point, our search for the bigger vision has not challenged the commonsense theory in which human choice reigns, but appears rather to have deepened it. With the coming of civilization, with the sudden explosion of possibilities, animals bursting out of nature's grasp were sure to get into trouble, like rampant sailors in port on leave. Animals ill-equipped for sudden freedom were bound to seek the protection of new cages, like the human herds the

Grand Inquisitor served. If anything, it seems, we are now in a better position to appreciate just how extraordinary and dangerous human freedom is.

But as cultural evolution erupted into civilization, something strange happened to human freedom. As man became freer of the controls of nature, he became subject to new, perhaps harsher necessities. Paradoxically, the very open-endedness of human possibilities created forces that drove human destiny in a direction that people did not and would not choose. Civilization represented not the old cultural process coming to fuller fruit but a new phenomenon governed by *a wholly new evolutionary principle*. The emergence of this new principle marks the vital point of discontinuity in the history of life and explains civilization's problematic course.

In two steps, I now show how this is so.

9. The Struggle for Power

In his classic, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes describes what he calls "the state of nature" as an anarchic situation in which all are compelled, for their very survival, to engage in a ceaseless struggle for power. About this "war of all against all," two important points should be made: that Hobbes's vision of the dangers of anarchy captured an important dimension of the human condition, and that to call that condition "the state of nature" is a remarkable misnomer.

In nature, all pursue survival for themselves and their kind. But they can do so only within biologically evolved limits. The living order of nature, though it has no ruler, is not in the least anarchic. Each pursues a kind of self-interest, each is a law unto itself, but the separate interests and laws have been formed over aeons of selection to form part of a tightly ordered harmonious system. Although the state of nature involves struggle, the struggle is part of an order. Each component of the living system has a defined place out of which no ambition can extricate it. Hunting-gathering societies were to a very great extent likewise contained by natural limits.

With the rise of civilization, the limits fall away. The natural self-interest and pursuit of survival remain, but they are no longer governed by any order. The new civilized forms of society, with more complex social and political structures, created the new possibility of indefinite social expansion: more and more people organized over more and more territory. All other forms of life had always found inevitable limits placed upon their growth by scarcity and consequent death. But civilized society

was developing the unprecedented capacity for unlimited growth as an entity. (The limitlessness of this possibility does not emerge fully at the outset, but rather becomes progressively more realized over the course of history as people invent methods of transportation, communication, and governance which extend the range within which coherence and order can be maintained.) Out of the living order there emerged a living entity with no defined place.

In a finite world, societies all seeking to escape death-dealing scarcity through expansion will inevitably come to confront each other. Civilized societies, therefore, though lacking inherent limitations to their growth, do encounter new external limits—in the form of one another. Because human beings (like other living creatures) have “excess reproductive capacity,” meaning that human numbers tend to increase indefinitely unless a high proportion of the population dies prematurely, each civilized society faces an unpleasant choice. If an expanding society willingly stops where its growth would infringe upon neighboring societies, it allows death to catch up and overtake its population. If it goes beyond those limits, it commits aggression. With no natural order or overarching power to prevent it, some will surely choose to take what belongs to their neighbors rather than to accept the limits that are compulsory for every other form of life.

In such circumstances, a Hobbesian struggle for power among societies becomes inevitable. We see that *what is freedom from the point of view of each single unit is anarchy in an ungoverned system of those units*. A freedom unknown in nature is cruelly transmuted into an equally unnatural state of anarchy, with its terrors and its destructive war of all against all.

As people stepped across the threshold into civilization, they inadvertently stumbled into a chaos that had never before existed. The relations among societies were uncontrolled and virtually uncontrollable. Such an ungoverned system imposes unchosen necessities: civilized people were compelled to enter a struggle for power.

The meaning of “power,” a concept central to this entire work, needs to be explored. Power may be defined as the capacity to achieve one’s will against the will of another. The exercise of power thus infringes upon the exercise of choice, for to be the object of another’s power is to have his choice substituted for one’s own.⁴ Power becomes important where

4. As used here, power is a coercive capacity. Power may also be defined as the ability to restrict the range of another’s choices. It is thus differentiated from the kind of persuasive power that changes how others decide to exercise choice (except to the extent that, as, for example, in brainwashing, and less obviously in many other forms of indoctrination, coercive power creates the situation in which persuasion becomes possible).

In the discussion in chap. 7, “The Market as a Power System,” a noncoercive (option-expanding) form of power is incorporated into the overall picture of the problem of power in the evolution of civilized systems.

two actors (or more) would choose the same thing but cannot both have it; power becomes important when the obstacles to the achievement of one's will come from the will of others. Thus, as the expanding capacities of human societies created an overlap in the range of their grasp and desire, the intersocietal struggle for power arose.

But the new unavailability of this struggle is but the first and smaller step in the transmutation of the apparent freedom of civilized peoples into bondage to the necessities of power.

10. The Selection for Power: The Parable of the Tribes

The new human freedom made striving for expansion and power possible. Such freedom, when multiplied, creates anarchy. The anarchy among civilized societies meant that the play of power in the system was uncontrollable. In an anarchic situation like that, no one can choose that the struggle for power shall cease. But there is one more element in the picture: *no one is free to choose peace, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity for power.* This is the lesson of the parable of the tribes.

Imagine a group of tribes living within reach of one another. If all choose the way of peace, then all may live in peace. But what if all but one choose peace, and that one is ambitious for expansion and conquest? What can happen to the others when confronted by an ambitious and potent neighbor? Perhaps one tribe is attacked and defeated, its people destroyed and its lands seized for the use of the victors. Another is defeated, but this one is not exterminated; rather, it is subjugated and transformed to serve the conqueror. A third seeking to avoid such disaster flees from the area into some inaccessible (and undesirable) place, and its former homeland becomes part of the growing empire of the power-seeking tribe. Let us suppose that others observing these developments decide to defend themselves in order to preserve themselves and their autonomy. But the irony is that successful defense against a power-maximizing aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power, and if the threatening society has discovered ways to magnify its power through innovations in organization or technology (or whatever), the defensive society will have to transform itself into something more like its foe in order to resist the external force.

I have just outlined four possible outcomes for the threatened tribes: destruction, absorption and transformation, withdrawal, and imitation.

*In every one of these outcomes the ways of power are spread throughout the system. This is the parable of the tribes.*⁵

The parable of the tribes is a theory of social evolution which shows that power is like a contaminant, a disease, which once introduced will gradually yet inexorably become universal in the system of competing societies. More important than the inevitability of the struggle for power is the profound social evolutionary consequence of that struggle once it begins. *A selection for power among civilized societies is inevitable.* If anarchy assured that power among civilized societies could not be governed, the selection for power signified that increasingly the ways of power would govern the destiny of mankind. This is the new evolutionary principle that came into the world with civilization. Here is the social evolutionary black hole that we have sought as an explanation of the harmful warp in the course of civilization's development.

The idea is simple; its logic, I believe, compelling. In scant and partial form, this idea appears in a variety of places.⁶ Nowhere, however, has it been developed beyond the most germinal stage. And nowhere has it been shown to provide an essential key to the strange destiny of our species, as I intend to do in this work.

11. The Reign of Power

The rise of civilization enormously escalated conflict among human societies. This escalation alone would have magnified the importance of power in human life. But the reign of power derives far less from the struggle for power in itself than from the selective process that struggle generates. Even if intersocietal competition had always been as intense as it became with the rise of civilization, it could not have had an equally dramatic and swift social evolutionary impact. For selection can only operate to the extent that there is a diversity of types among which to choose. Even though primitive societies are surely not absolutely identical to one another, their differences can exist only within fairly narrow limits. The potential importance of selection among them is correspondingly limited. With the emergence of civilization, however, these limits fell away and considerable diversity became possible. The greater the diversity among societies, the more important selection among them becomes, for the civilized societies that survive or die can represent very different approaches to human social life. The social evolutionary trap that snared

5. These four possible outcomes are examined in greater depth in chap. 2, "Heads I Win, Tails You Lose."

6. E.g., Tylor (quoted in Harris, 1965, p. 212); Bagehot, 1956, p. 32; Keller, 1916, pp. 62–63; Mosca, 1939, p. 29; McNeill, 1963, p. 806; Carneiro, 1972, pp. 733–738, Lenski, 1970, p. 91.

mankind thus had two jaws—the new open-ended cultural possibilities and the escalating struggle for power. The first made significant selection possible, and the second determined that adequate competitive power would be a primary criterion for social survival. Selection sorts through the wide variety of cultural possibilities, inexorably spreading the ways of power.

The competitive power of a society is a function of many components of its culture. The way it is organized—politically, socially, and economically—is important. Vital, too, is its technology. Ideology and the psychological structure of the people are also essential determinants of a society's power. The consistent selection for power, therefore, can shape the whole cultural life of civilized peoples in its many dimensions.

Among all the cultural possibilities, only some will be viable. The selection for power can discard those who revere nature in favor of those willing and able to exploit it.⁷ The warlike may eliminate the pacifistic; the ambitious, the content. Civilized societies will displace the remaining primitives, modern industrial powers will sweep away archaic cultures.⁸ The iron makers will be favored over those with copper or no metallurgy at all, and the horsemen will have sway over the unmounted. Societies that are coherently organized and have strong leadership will make unviable others with more casual power structures and more local autonomy.⁹ As the parable of the tribes spreads the ways of power, what looked like open-ended cultural possibilities are channeled in a particular, unchosen direction.

What is viable in a world beset by the struggle for power is what can prevail. What prevails may not be what best meets the needs of mankind. The continuous selection for power has thus continually closed off many humane cultural options that people might otherwise have preferred. Power therefore rules human destiny.

If the ambition of societies for power grew originally out of Malthusian necessities,¹⁰ it did not need to remain so. As the selection for power continued, it ultimately would favor those whose hunger for power exceeded their material need. In the beginning, people struggled because they truly needed room to live. As civilization developed, the struggle became more one for the kind of *Lebensraum* that represents a love of power for its own sake. The struggle for power developed a life of its own that would feed an unnatural growth in the “necessities” imposed

7. On how the parable of the tribes illuminates the evolution of man's relationship with nature, see chap. 7, “Man's Dominion.”

8. See chap. 2, “Two Great Waves of Change.”

9. The implications of the selection for power on the structure of civilized societies are explored in chap. 3, especially the sections on the evolution toward larger, more complex, and more centrally controlled societies.

10. For more on this, see chap. 2, “The Mother of Invention.”

by power upon humankind. The selective process insured that it would most definitely not be the meek who inherited the earth.

Just as the freedom from the regime of nature brought upon mankind a new bondage to power, so also did the open-endedness of possibilities prove not a release from but a part of the trap. Because the process of cultural innovation is open-ended, there can be no end point in the maximization of power. (The awesome power of ancient Rome could not survive today even in weaker regions of the world.) The evolution of civilization is therefore marked by a perpetual (though sometimes interrupted) escalation in the level of power a society must possess to survive intersocietal competition.¹¹ The reign of power thus has no limit.

Yet this reign—and this point must be stressed—is a subtle one. When the determining force is a selective process, the force can have an overwhelming impact without being blatant in operation.

First, a selective process gains its potency from being cumulative over time. It is a mill that grinds slowly but exceedingly fine. At any given time, the ways of comparative weakness may coexist with those of power, surviving for generations and even centuries. The relations among societies are not like an ongoing tournament programmed to eliminate the losers as efficiently as possible. Eventually, however, the bill from the parable of the tribes becomes due; the deficit in power leads to social evolutionary default. Perhaps the powerful nation finally turns and swallows its weaker neighbors, like the Romans in Italy, the Soviets in Lithuania, the Chinese in Tibet. Or perhaps, the more powerful culture extends its reach to threaten more distant peoples, like the projection of Roman power into ancient Britain or the coming of the Europeans to North America. Selection is a patient process. Sifting gradually, almost casually, through the cultural possibilities over many millennia, it can exert a decisive influence over the emerging shape of civilization without having to be central to the drama at any given time. Given enough time, a force that is consistent and enduring becomes decisive. The selection for power is such a force.

This leads to a second point about a theory of social evolution like the parable of the tribes: it is not reductionistic. To claim that power has had primacy in shaping the destiny of civilization does not imply that the striving for power is at the heart of human social existence and that everything else is merely a function of power. In this respect, the parable of the tribes is wholly different structurally from a theory like Marx's. Marx asserted that certain aspects of a society's economic life were most

11. On the perpetual escalation of the level of power needed, see chap. 3, "The Adrenalin Society." On the interruptions and temporary reverses of this escalation, see chap. 7, "The Death of the Unnatural."

fundamental and that the rest of the culture (e.g., politics and ideology) was essentially “superstructure” determined by the economic substructure. It was, he said, in the economic dimension of social life that the real engine of historical change was to be found, leading civilization from one stage to another. The parable of the tribes proposes no such causal relationships among the aspects of culture. The reign of power does not mean that power determines what social life is about.

The selective process stands outside the immediate arena of human existence. An analogy may be drawn from biological selection. When coal began to coat everything in Britain with dust, a species of moth that had been white began over the generations to darken. The light-colored individuals were too easily spotted by predators against the coal dust and were selected against. Yet, that selection directed a change toward darkness in no way implies that darkness became central to the butterfly's life processes, determining how it flew, what it ate, how it reproduced, and so on. By the same token, the parable of the tribes can claim that the selection for the ways of power has dominated the profound transformations of the evolution of civilization without claiming that power has been the central preoccupation of civilized peoples or that power maximization has been their principal goal.

People, of course, have an awareness that moths do not. So while the moths may have unwittingly been transformed by the power of their predators, people have known that power is a problem in human affairs. If those moths had human intelligence, they would have sought ways of darkening themselves without waiting for accident to do the job. And, in fact, civilized peoples, seeing themselves caught up in a struggle they could not avoid, have sought to cloak themselves in the protective covering of adequate power. (No one should know this better than we who for more than a generation have been engaged, with horrified self-awareness, in an ever-escalating arms race.) Therefore, power has played a role, and an important one, in the very arena of human affairs even as it played a cumulatively decisive one through an external process of selection. Power has been but one human concern among many, however, and the parable of the tribes neither does nor needs to claim otherwise.

The parable of the tribes thus does not require that history be rewritten. At any given time and place people were doing what they appeared to be doing with or without this new, social evolutionary perspective. The action of history looks the same through this vision, but suddenly visible is a subtle by-product of this action with long-term significance. The parable of the tribes illuminates not the pieces of history so much as the entire sweep of history. For it is in the overall trajectory of civilization that power has its reign.

12. Power versus Choice in Social Evolution

The parable of the tribes provides a perspective on social evolution quite different from the commonsense view. Even without rewriting history, the parable of the tribes puts it in a wholly new light.

The Question of Choice.—The commonsense model emphasizes the role of free human choice: social evolution is directed by a benign process of selection in which people choose what they want from among the cultural alternatives. Viewed from the perspective of the parable of the tribes, human destiny is no longer governed by free human choice. At the heart of the loss of choice is not that some could impose their will upon others, but that the whole reign of power came unbidden by anyone to dominate human life. People inadvertently stumbled into a struggle for power beyond their ability to avoid or to stop. This struggle generated a selective process, also beyond human control, which molded change in a direction that was inevitable—toward power maximization in human societies.

The parable of the tribes is not, however, rigidly deterministic. It does not maintain that specific events are preordained. Even major developments can arise owing to relatively fortuitous circumstances. The history of a continent may be altered by a burst of human creativity, a people's destiny may hinge on the wisdom or folly of its leaders, the texture of a culture may bear for ages the imprint of some charismatic visionary. What the parable of the tribes does assert is that once mankind had begun the process of developing civilization, the *overall direction* of its evolution was inevitable. This is suggested by the way civilization developed in those regions of the Old and New worlds where it arose more or less independently: their courses show significant parallels (see Steward, 1955). People can act freely and intelligently, but uncontrolled circumstances determine the situation in which they must act and mold the evolution of their systems.¹²

Thus we find that the major trends in the transformation of human society have had the effect of increasing competitive power. This effect in itself does not prove that the selection for power has been the cause of these trends, especially since many of these transformations also increase a society's ability to achieve goals outside the realm of competition. A major purpose of what follows is to make compelling the case for the contention of the parable of the tribes that the reign of power has been a significant factor in dictating the principal trends of the social evolution.

History-makers.—People do make history. Historical "forces" can be expressed only in the doings of flesh-and-blood human beings. In the

12. For more about the limitations on human choice in history, see the next chapter, "The Theft of Human Choice."

commonsense view of social evolution, history is shaped by “the people” in general. To recognize that some people play a large historical role and that others play almost no role at all still falls within the realm of common sense. This inequality does not challenge the essentially democratic view of history as governed by human choices if the history makers are seen as representative of humanity. They can be representative if, like George Washington, they are first in the hearts of their countrymen, or if, like Bach or Edison, they have an extraordinary ability to create what the people want.

The parable of the tribes, however, sees the history makers as an unrepresentative lot. To the extent that social evolution is governed by the selection for power, it is the power maximizers who play the important role in the drama of history. This group is selected for its starring role not by the human cast as a whole but by impersonal and ungoverned forces. They are therefore not representative in the democratic sense. Nor in the Gallup Poll sense, for they are selected because of how they are different from the other actors. They are different in their capacity to get and to wield power. Finally, they are not representative in the sense of the hero who carries his community's banner and fulfills his community's aspirations, for the power wielders of history have often been the conquerors, the destroyers, the oppressors of their fellow human beings. Though we must see history as a drama in which the main actors are the powerful and aggressive, we should not slip into seeing them as the villains, for it is not the actors who set the stage or who govern the thrust of the plot.¹³

The category of “power maximizers” embraces a couple of different kinds of actors in the human drama. Most especially, it includes entire sovereign social entities (like the imperialistic tribe of the parable) who impinge upon other, previously autonomous societies. The parable of the tribes focuses primarily on the intersocietal system because that system forms the comprehensive context for human action,¹⁴ but more importantly because in that system anarchy has been most complete and least curable. Anarchy is at the core of the problem of power, making struggle inevitable and allowing the ways of power to spread uncontrolled throughout the whole like a contaminant. Thus, nowhere has power had so free and decisive a reign as in that arena of sovereign actors where, by definition, there is no power to hold all in awe.

Yet the problem of power exists in some form also within societies; for even though in one sense societies are governed, in another more

13. The role of the history makers and, in particular, the extent that the will even of the powerful can be said to have determined the direction of history are explored in chap. 2, “Choosing the Choosers.”

14. For more on this point, see chap. 7, “Men Are Not Ants” (“Wheels within Wheels”).

profound sense they are usually subject to anarchy. The formation of government and the establishment of the rule of law can be—and usually have been in large measure—the embodiment of the rule of raw power rather than a restraint upon it. The search for a fuller understanding of the problem of power in social evolution leads therefore to an *intrasocietal analogue* of the parable of the tribes. And the category of history's power maximizers includes those groups (like the feudal class) and individuals (like Stalin) who are successful in competing for power within a society's boundaries.¹⁵ Again, it is those distinguished by their capacity to grasp and wield power who gain the means to shape the whole (social) system according to their ways and their vision. And again, the history makers are cast in their roles not by the people affected but by an unchosen selective process; and generally, they are not those whom mankind would choose to guide its destiny.

Government may frequently be the agency of the rule of power, but only government can restrain power in the interests of other values. If people, rather than the impersonal selection for power, are to control their destiny, it will be through the design of systems to control power.¹⁶

The Spread of Cultural Innovations.—Both the commonsense view and the parable of the tribes would predict that innovations tend to spread from their place of origin. Both would predict an erosion of cultural diversity among societies, but the two theories view this process of cultural homogenization differently. If innovations are seen as “improvements,” naturally they will spread. When people in more “backward” areas learn of better ways of meeting their needs, they will adopt them. Cultural diversity is thus diminished by a process of diffusion. In the perspective of the parable of the tribes, the historic trend toward cultural homogeneity is decreed by the reign of power. Whether or not a cultural innovation spreads throughout the system of interacting societies depends not so much on its ability to enhance the quality of human life as on its capacity to increase the competitive power of those who adopt it. The ways of power inevitably become universal. While the diffusion model represents cultural homogenization as the result of free human choice, the parable of the tribes stresses the role of compulsion: the conqueror spreads his ways either directly or by compelling others to imitate him in self-defense.¹⁷

15. The parable of the tribes usually regards a society as a single entity, society being defined as “a group manifesting sufficient cooperation internally and sufficient opposition externally to be recognizable as a unit” (Quincy Wright, 1965, p. 145). But it is nonetheless also true that a society is an arena within which smaller entities contend.

16. These issues are explored in chap. 7, “Men Are Not Ants.”

17. The question of cultural homogenization is explored in chap. 3, “The Common Denominator.”