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Q2(c)

How do diffusionism and evolutionism differ as explanations of Culture Change?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Historical particularism (Boas)

(b) Historical particularism (Boas); Diffusionism (British, German and American)

Core demand of the question

- How do diffusionism and evolutionism differ as explanations of Culture Change?
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Evolutionism treats change as internal progress or energy growth.

Diffusionism treats change as movement of traits from a source.

Extreme Egyptocentric diffusion failed.

Boas used cautious diffusion as culture history.

Most real change mixes local development and contact.

Introduction

Evolutionism explains change as internal development along stages. Diffusionism explains change as traits travelling from a centre. They answer different questions about the same pots and myths.

Body

Evolutionism

- **Tylor** and **Morgan** treated culture as progressive. Independent invention could produce similar stages.
- **Change is mainly from within:** new technique, new family, new gods as society grows more complex.
- **White** later measured evolution by energy capture. **Steward** allowed many lines, still developmental.

Diffusionism

- **Graebner** and the **Kulturkreis** school mapped trait complexes moving as packages.
- British **Elliot Smith** and **Perry** overplayed Egypt as the single source of civilisation.
- **American** Boas and **Kroeber** used **diffusion without the Egypt story**: a trait has a history of contact.

The difference that matters

- Evolution asks how a form grows in place. Diffusion asks from where it was borrowed.
- **Goldenweiser** limited parallelism. A canoe design may spread; a state may still evolve locally.

- **Good method names both:** **Childe's** Neolithic spread is diffusion of a package; urbanism also has local take-off.

Flow diagram

Culture change -> Evolution internal stages

Culture change -> Diffusion borrowed traits

Evolution internal stages -> Tylor Morgan White

Diffusion borrowed traits -> Kulturkreis Kroeber

Conclusion

Evolutionism writes change as development. Diffusionism writes it as borrowing. Culture change in the field is usually a mix of the two.

Facts & figures

Tylor

Independent invention and psychic unity supported parallel evolution of customs.

Elliot Smith

Hyper-diffusion from Egypt, now a cautionary extreme.

Kroeber

Culture-element surveys tracked diffusion in Native North America.

Childe

Neolithic and urban revolutions combined spread of techniques with local social take-off.

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