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Q7(c)

Discuss the approaches of Leslie White, Julian Steward and Marshall Sahlins in the light of cultural evolution

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Neo-evolutionism (Childe, White, Steward, Sahlins and Service)

(f) Neo-evolutionism (Childe, White, Steward, Sahlins and Service)

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the approaches of Leslie **White**, Julian **Steward** and Marshall Sahlins in the light of cultural evolution
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

White tied cultural evolution to energy capture.

Steward replaced one ladder with multilinear ecology.

Sahlins used **Service**'s types, then the affluent forager and a turn to meaning.

None simply revived Morgan's three stages.

The debate is how far energy and habitat explain culture.

Introduction

After Boas blocked unilinear ladders, **White**, **Steward**, and Sahlins rebuilt evolution in different keys: energy, ecology, and then a critique of the West's own story.

Body

Leslie White

- Culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita. Tools and thermodynamics, not ideas alone, move stages.
- The scheme is neo-evolutionist and general. It underplays local history, which Boasians had prized.

Julian Steward

- **Multilinear evolution** and cultural ecology: similar environments can yield similar adaptations, as in irrigation states.
- The **patrilineal band** and **Great Basin** Shoshone work showed culture as a working relation with habitat, not a single ladder.

Marshall Sahlins

- Early **Sahlins** with **Elman Service** still used bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states. Stone Age Economics then stressed the **original affluent society** of foragers.

- Later Sahlins turned against crude materialism and, in *Culture and Practical Reason*, against treating economy as nature. Evolution became a question about meaning as well as surplus.

Together

- **White** gives a global energy metric. **Steward** gives local pathways. Sahlins first classifies, then warns that evolution stories are themselves cultural.

Flow diagram

White energy -> General evolution

Steward ecology -> Multilinear

Sahlins -> Types then critique

Conclusion

White measured energy, **Steward** mapped many paths, Sahlins first used neo-evolutionary types and then criticised the reduction of culture to calories. Cultural evolution after Boas is plural.

Facts & figures

White

Energy and the Evolution of Culture; culture as extra-somatic adaptation.

Steward

Theory of Culture Change; cultural ecology and multilinear evolution.

Service

Band-tribe-chiefdom-state typology that early Sahlins shared.

Original affluent society

Sahlins' argument that foragers can meet wants with modest work, against a scarcity myth.

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