

# 13/Retrospect and Prospect

*Now this is not the end.  
It is not even the beginning of the end.  
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*  
Winston Churchill

HAVING COMPLETED our survey and analysis of the distributive process in a series of highly variant societal types, it is time to assess the adequacy of the basic theory developed in Chapters 2 through 4 and summarized in Figure 2, Chapter 4. Does the evidence of ethnography, history, and sociology support this theory, or does it contradict it? If supportive, are changes or additions indicated? Finally, what further work is required? These are the primary concerns of this chapter.

One other question which invites our attention at this point concerns the relation of this theory to the older theoretical traditions. To what extent has our inquiry led us to adopt the positions of the functionalists, and to what extent the positions of the conflict theorists? And, one must add, to what extent has our investigation led us to positions which diverge from both?

### The General Theory Reexamined

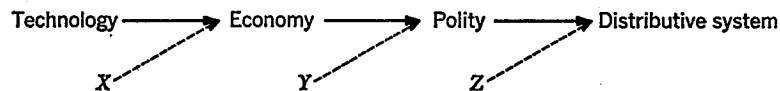
In the light of the evidence presented in Chapters 5 through 12, one can give an essentially affirmative answer to the basic question of the validity of the general theory presented in the introductory chapters. The most basic characteristics of distributive systems do appear to be shaped by the interaction of those *constant elements* in the human situation which we identified earlier and the *variable element of technology*. As hypothesized, the influence of these factors appears to be mediated by a series of social organizational factors whose variation is greatly influenced by prior variations in technology. It was this systematic covariation, of course, which made possible the development of the societal typology, which proved so valuable.

The high degree of support for the theory was not completely unexpected because of the manner in which the theory was constructed. Despite some appearances to the contrary, the theory presented in the early chapters was not a simple exercise in deductive logic. Rather, it represented the end product of an already extensive process of both induction and deduction. In a sense, the theory was designed to fit the facts, or at least those facts with which I was familiar when I began writing this volume. However, the theory with which I began writing was not the same that I had taught ten years previously. On the contrary, over the course of that decade I constantly shifted and modified my theoretical position to try to get a better fit between theory and data. In the process I found myself shifting from what was basically a functionalist position to what I have called a synthetic or synthesizing position. In other words, I found an increasing need to incorporate hypotheses and postulates which had little or no part in the functionalist tradition, yet without wholly abandoning the latter.

In the light of the evidence set forth in Chapters 5 through 12, it appears that the general theory corresponds reasonably well with the evidence, but the correspondence is not perfect and certain modifications and changes are necessary. To begin with, our survey of advanced horticultural and agrarian societies indicates that the relationship between technology and political organization is not so simple as anticipated. In these societies one finds significant variations in level of political development associated with apparently limited variations in technology. This suggests that we must think of the level of technological advance either as a *necessary*, but not *sufficient*, cause of political advance, or as the generator of a "threshold effect," whereby a limited advance in technology

causes (or makes possible) a major advance in political organization. Perhaps both apply. In any case, it is clear that at certain levels of technological development, a considerable degree of variation in political development becomes possible. This has significant consequences for the distributive process because the level of political development is clearly a major determinant of the character of distributive systems.

A second modification which is indicated is a distinction at the analytical level between the concepts "technology" and "economy." In retrospect, it appears that these two terms were often used interchangeably in the preceding chapters. In the majority of instances this caused no great difficulty because differences in economy, i.e., the economic organization of a society, usually parallel differences in technology, i.e., the cultural means by which a society relates to its environment. Thus, a hunting and gathering technology is accompanied by a hunting and gathering economy. Difficulties arise, however, in the case of societal types standing on comparable levels of technological development, as in the case of agrarian and maritime societies. Here, the same elements of technology appear to be available to both, but certain elements are emphasized in one and neglected in the other. The reasons for this reflect, in part at least, the influence of environmental factors, though other factors are probably also at work. Economic variations which occur independently of technological variations appear to have effects on distributive systems comparable to those produced by political variations. Hence, we might more accurately portray the links in the causal chain as follows: <sup>1</sup>



In addition, of course, there are elements of feedback operating, which further complicates relations.

In addition to demonstrating the importance of technology and social organization in the shaping of distributive systems, our findings also demonstrate the influence of other factors, including some which were not identified in Chapters 2 through 4. Two of these stand out because of their widespread importance: (1) *variations in ideology*, and (2) *variations in the personal attributes of political leaders*.

Ideology seems to have its greatest impact in the more advanced societies. Ideological variations of great magnitude and importance for distributive systems presuppose the existence of specialists in ideology, supported by appropriate religious and political institutions. These devel-

<sup>1</sup> The symbols X, Y, and Z are included as a reminder that our theory assumes that other factors exercise an influence at each point in the causal chain.

opments seem to have their beginnings in advanced horticultural societies, while coming to full flower only in industrial societies.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of ideology was seen most clearly in the somewhat unexpected halting, and possible reversal, of the trend toward increasing social inequality, so pronounced in the evolution from hunting and gathering to agrarian societies. In Chapter 4 (page 85), it was predicted that the degree of inequality in distributive systems would vary directly with the size of a society's surplus. This was qualified in tentative fashion to make allowance for the possibility that persons who lacked power individually might, through organization, develop a measure of countervailing power; and it was "predicted" (not without some awareness of the facts) that this would be most likely in democratic nations with an egalitarian or socialistic ideology. Though it was not possible to develop any quantitative measure of overall inequality, the evidence which we reviewed strongly suggests that the average level of inequality in the most advanced industrial societies is no greater than that in the average advanced agrarian society, and probably less. Graphically, the evolutionary pattern appears to resemble the pattern in Figure 1. (It should be emphasized that this figure is intended as nothing more than a very approximate graphic summary.)

The influence of variations in the personal attributes of political leaders also seems to have its greatest impact in the more advanced societies,

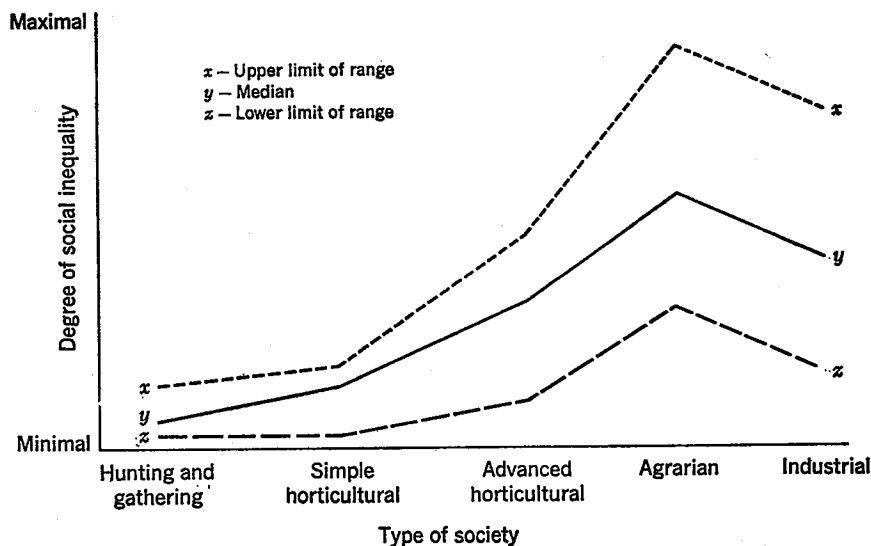


Figure 1 Degree of social inequality by type of society.

<sup>2</sup> One might add that they also flourish in industrializing hybrid societies.

especially when constitutionalism is at low ebb. As noted previously, personality differences do not cancel out when small numbers are involved, particularly in the case of a single individual, such as the ruler or leader of a nation. In modern industrial societies, political leaders have immense powers available to them, especially in periods of crisis and revolution. In periods of crisis, such as the great depression of the 1930s, the powers of leaders are increased through the voluntary delegation of power by others; in periods of revolution, as in Russia in 1917, the powers of leaders are increased through seizure. In either case, the ruler or leader (and often his immediate associates as well) have immense powers at their disposal. If the ruler is mad or fanatical, as in the case of Hitler and Stalin, the whole society is affected. Similarly, if he is unwell (as in the case of Wilson in his last years), indecisive, or uninformed, these attributes are likely to have serious consequences for the nation. The fact that others in the nation are healthy, decisive, or well informed will not normally cancel out the influence of such factors in the ruler or leader. Though there are obviously limits to the influence which the personal factor can exert, they are not so narrow as to make it trivial. Though the variable involved is essentially nonsociological in character, sociological theories must find a place for it.<sup>3</sup>

Once again it may be helpful to present in graphic form an outline of the basic elements of our general theory, but modified to take account of what has been learned from our broadly comparative survey of human societies. As a comparison of Figure 2 in Chapter 4 and Figure 2 in this chapter reveals, and as the preceding discussion indicates, a number of changes have been required, but the basic structure of the theory has not had to be altered. On the contrary, the fit between theory and data has been remarkably good on the whole.

The major differences between the figures have already been discussed, but several lesser differences also deserve note. To begin with, our

<sup>3</sup> One of the clearest indications of the importance of this variable in modern times can be seen in the influence of Pope John XXIII on the Roman Catholic Church. At the time of his election, no sociologist would have predicted the revolutionary character of his pontificate. All reports indicated he was a compromise candidate whose chief virtues in the eyes of his electors were his age and unspectacular record. Those who voted for him did so chiefly in the expectation that he would play the role of a harmless caretaker. By contrast, he became the most revolutionary pope of modern times. Although it is true that his revolutionary influence was only possible because of tendencies already widespread in his Church, these same forces were unable to make themselves felt to any great degree during the reigns of his predecessors. Furthermore, these same forces have found themselves checked on numerous occasions by the actions of John's successor. In short, had John not become pope, the course of Catholicism would have been very different. Much the same might be said of Germany without Hitler, etc.

The constants:

See Figure 2, Chapter 4

The variables:

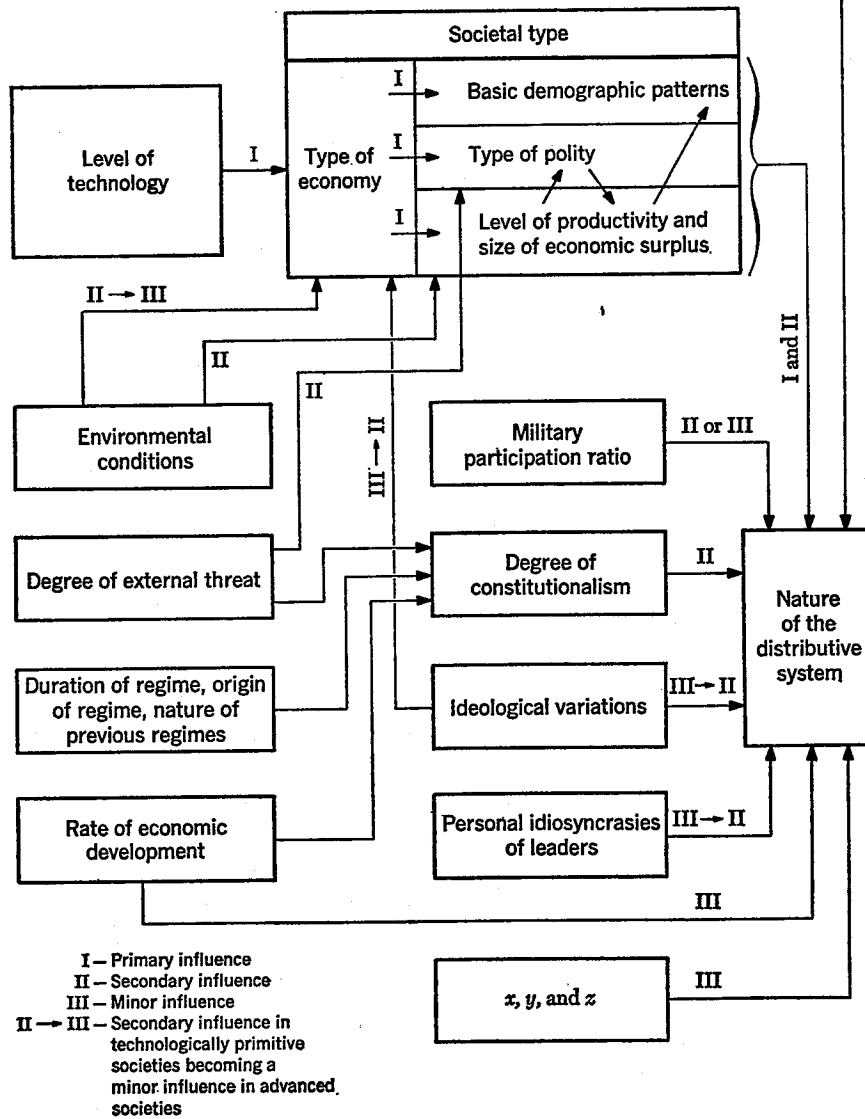


Figure 2 Diagrammatic summary of the general theory of stratification.

survey has clearly demonstrated the need for the little arrow showing feedback from the type of polity to the size of the surplus. As our analysis of agrarian societies showed, the size of the economic surplus sometimes depends on the system of social organization as well as on the level of technology. The creation and preservation of an economic surplus in agrarian societies would probably have been impossible without an authoritarian, undemocratic, and exploitative political system. Without such a polity, and without modern methods of birth control, any surplus that might have been produced would soon have been consumed by the rapid expansion of population.<sup>4</sup>

Two other changes involve the separation of variables out from the cluster of variables which in Figure 2 (Chapter 4) were used to predict variations in the degree of constitutionalism. The first of these is the *degree of external threat*, which we found to be linked with variations in type of polity, at least in advanced horticultural societies (see Chapter 7, page 163). The second is the *rate of economic development*, which at several points seemed linked with variations in distributive systems. Specifically, a high rate of economic development appeared to be linked with a greater willingness on the part of the dominant classes to make sacrifices in *relative* terms, i.e., in their share of the gross national product, in order to insure increases in *absolute* terms (see Chapter 10, pages 314 to 315).

These changes direct attention to what has proven a highly rewarding feature of the methodology of our analysis: *the practice of constantly alternating the processes of induction and deduction*. As noted in the introductory chapter, this is not done often enough in contemporary sociology, with the result that the fit between theory and data is often poor or unclear. By constantly comparing theory and data, and, when necessary, modifying the theory to conform to the data, cumulative growth and development are achieved. The possibility of this is further enhanced by working with an open theoretical system which permits the addition of new variables and the elimination or modification of old ones. As a consequence, a considerable number of important insights have emerged which were by no means obvious at the start of the analysis. In addition to the influences of political institutions on the size of economic surpluses, which we have already noted, one might add the discovery of the high incidence of downward mobility in agrarian societies, the clarification of

<sup>4</sup> The growth of population might possibly have been kept in check by continuous warfare. There is some evidence that this was important in horticultural societies, and perhaps early agrarian as well. In mature agrarian societies, however, the growth in the size of empires prevented this; the creation of a Pax Romana and its equivalent elsewhere was a serious hindrance.

the economic logic of "potlatch" practices in horticultural societies, and the general clarification of the importance of political institutions and their place in the causal chain shaping distributive systems. A number of other examples might be cited equally well. In short, an open theory of the type used here combines the best features of closed theories and eclecticism while avoiding their dangers and difficulties, providing, as it does, a basis for continuing growth and development.

### Conservatism and Radicalism Revisited

Before turning to the problems of the future, it may be well to return briefly to the two older theoretical traditions in the field of social stratification, conservatism and radicalism. In Chapter 1 the hypothesis was developed that these traditions are gradually being supplanted by a newer one which is essentially a synthesis of both. It is only fitting, therefore, that in this final chapter we examine our theory to determine whether it is, in fact, a synthesis of the older traditions.

Probably the best method of doing this is to review the eight basic issues listed at the end of Chapter 1 which have historically divided radicals from conservatives. In reviewing them we can see to what extent the theory developed in Chapters 2 through 12 conforms to, or deviates from, the older traditions.

The first divisive issue concerns *the nature of man*. Conservatives have traditionally been distrustful of man's nature and have emphasized the need for restraining social institutions, while radicals have taken a more optimistic view. With respect to the nature of man, the position taken in the present theory leans heavily in the *conservative* direction, stressing the strongly self-seeking elements.

The second point of controversy between the two older traditions concerns the *nature of society*. Conservatives have usually emphasized the systemic nature of society, while radicals have viewed society more as a setting within which struggles take place. In this respect, our theory leans heavily in the *radical* direction, with human societies viewed as very imperfect systems.

Third, radicals and conservatives have differed on the question of *the degree to which systems of inequality are maintained by coercion*. Radicals have emphasized the importance of coercion while conservatives have argued for the importance of consensus. Here our theory tends in the *conservative* direction in the analysis of societies with little or no economic surplus, while in societies where the surplus is more substantial, it stresses the *radical's* element of coercion.



Fourth, proponents of the two traditions have differed concerning *the degree to which inequality generates conflict*. Radicals have regarded conflict as one of the chief consequences of inequality; conservatives have minimized it. Though our analysis has not been greatly concerned with consequences of inequality, it leans heavily in the *radical* direction in this respect.

Fifth, conservatives and radicals have disagreed on the question of *how rights and privileges are acquired*. Radicals have laid great stress on force, fraud, and inheritance, conservatives on hard work, delegation by others, and so forth. Our analysis has shown both kinds of factors to be involved, with the latter determining the distribution of the necessities of life, and the former having a major influence on the distribution of the surplus. However, even in the distribution of the surplus, the element of hard work is not absent, because those who serve the elites are obliged to work for what they receive and must even compete for their share of the surplus. Hence the picture is highly mixed. Furthermore, our analysis indicates that the importance of force varies greatly from one type of society to another. In the least advanced societies and in constitutionally advanced societies, force plays but a limited role. Thus, *the synthesis does not closely resemble either of the older traditions*, both of which give an oversimplified view.

Sixth, conservatives and radicals have argued the question of *the inevitability of inequality*. Conservatives have maintained that inequality is inevitable while radicals, or at least those in the egalitarian tradition, have disputed this. Here the synthesis leans strongly in the *conservative* direction, though this must be qualified by the assertion that, while inequality is apparently inevitable (given the nature of man) the degree of inequality is highly variable both within and between societal types.

Seventh, with respect to *the nature of the state and the law*, the position taken in the synthesis is a mixture of elements of both of the older traditions. In keeping with the radical tradition, the synthesis recognizes that the state and law often function as instruments of oppression and exploitation, especially in agrarian and the most advanced horticultural societies. However, even in these societies these institutions contribute something to the common good—the avoidance of anarchy, if nothing else. In certain other types of societies, notably hunting and gathering and simple horticultural, these political institutions contribute far more to the common good and far less to a privileged minority. This balance is also affected by such factors as the degree of constitutionalism, the military participation ratio, and the ideological commitments of the elite. In short,

*the synthesis cannot really be identified with either of the traditional positions.*

Eighth, and finally, conservatives and radicals have tended to differ in their *conception of class*, with conservatives favoring a nominalist definition, and radicals a realist. The synthesis, by contrast, invites one to view this as essentially an empirical question, assuming, however, that the conservative or nominalist view is correct unless evidence indicates otherwise. In general, the evidence in this area supports the *conservative* position more often than the radical.

As this brief summary makes clear, the synthesis can be said to resemble both of the older traditions—and neither. On three of the eight issues, it leans heavily in the conservative direction, on two, in the radical. On the remaining three it involves a complex mixture of elements of both traditions: strongly conservative with respect to economically and technologically backward societies, and radical with respect to more advanced societies. In summary, it is *an extremely complex mixture of elements from these two older traditions, yet at the same time unique and different.*

A further point which should be noted is that the synthesis has not been achieved by some sort of misguided effort to find a compromise solution and “split the difference” between the older traditions. Nor has it been achieved by an indiscriminate selection of elements from the two traditions. This leads to eclecticism, not synthesis. Rather, our strategy has been to go back to the inevitable source of any serious social theory—the problems concerning the nature of man and society—and build systematically from that point, drawing on the accumulated insights of both traditions as they prove relevant. This has necessitated the asking of new questions and the reformulation of old ones; it has also necessitated the frequent shift from categorical to variable concepts. Though it has not been possible to deal with most of the problems in this volume in systematic, quantitative form, an effort has been made to formulate hypotheses so they are amenable to testing in quantitative terms, and data have been described in what might be called protoquantitative terms. In other words, an effort has been made to indicate the central tendency and range of variation in the relationships examined. Thus, our approach differs from the older traditions methodologically as well as substantively.

#### **Agenda for the Future**

Looking to the future, it is clear that much remains to be done. At best, only a beginning has been made. One may hope, however, that the present analysis will serve as a base on which further work can be built, and

that the era of diffuse and frequently noncumulative research in the field of stratification may be drawing to a close.

If this is so, then one might well ask what the next tasks are, the tasks for the immediate future. It is to these that we now turn.

One of the first tasks obviously must be to *check and recheck* the data presented here and the conclusions based on them. Given the hundreds of generalizations, both large and small, developed in the first twelve chapters, it would be nothing short of miraculous if *all* stood up under critical scrutiny. Some will undoubtedly be disproved. If these are minor matters not linked in any essential way with the basic theory, this should cause little difficulty. On the other hand, if the general theory itself proves unsound, then this effort will have been even less than a beginning. This latter possibility seems unlikely, however, in view of the considerable body of evidence which has already been examined.

If the theory survives the critical scrutiny it will receive, then the next task will be *the sharpening of the formulation*. In its present form it is much too imprecise. Quantitative formulations of relationships have usually been impossible, and nonquantitative formulations have often been less precise than is desirable. For example, Figure 2 in this chapter differentiates between primary, secondary, and lesser influences. But what do these terms mean? Obviously they mean that *individually* the latter are less potent than the former, but is this true *collectively*? In other words, do variations in societal type alone account for more of the variance in distributive systems than all the other factors combined? The present analysis suggests that this might be the case since the differences *between* societal types generally appear greater than the differences *within* types. This could be an unintentional result of the practice of stressing central tendencies within types, but it could also be a reflection of the reality we seek to understand. This question, and many others like it, should not be left dangling indefinitely.

One aspect of stratification theory which is in special need of refinement and sharpening is the problem of the extent of *intrasocietal type* variations in distributive patterns and their causes. Too often, our analysis has been forced to gloss over such matters with little more than impressionistic judgments about central tendencies and ranges, and about the causes responsible for the variations. Intratype differences are very important from the theoretical standpoint and deserve far more careful analysis than could be given here. Some may argue that greater precision in such matters is impossible, but there is reason for optimism. Progress can be achieved even with fairly limited resources, as indicated by the pilot effort to ascertain in systematic, quantitative terms the factors responsible

for the differences between Fortes's Group A and Group B advanced horticultural societies (see pages 160 to 163). There is no reason why this same mode of analysis could not be applied to most other patterns of intratype variation.

Among the areas where greater precision is needed, the following are especially worthy of note. First, there is the important problem of the extent to which *ideology* influences distributive systems and the conditions under which its influence is maximized and minimized. Second, there is the same problem with respect to the role of *altruistic behavior*. Third, there are problems concerning *the interrelations of power, privilege, and prestige*. To what extent is prestige a function of power and privilege, and to what extent is it capable of varying independently? In this volume it has been assumed that prestige is "largely" a function of power and privilege, but that is much too imprecise. As problems such as these are studied, they will lead not only to a sharpening of the present theory, but to changes and modifications as well. As stated previously, it is inconceivable that all of the many generalizations in this volume will prove valid.

Finally, the present theory needs to be *extended*. New variables, new types of societies, and new patterns of relationships must be considered. As noted previously, I have deliberately ignored certain types of societies. Some pure types such as fishing, herding, and maritime societies were not dealt with,<sup>5</sup> nor were hybrid types, such as the industrializing agrarian, e.g., contemporary India, and the industrializing horticultural, e.g., certain African societies. Some of these types, notably the industrializing agrarian and horticultural societies, are of tremendous importance because they constitute the underdeveloped countries of the modern world, which are experiencing such traumatic difficulties in their efforts to industrialize.

The present theory also needs to be extended by the examination of new patterns of relationships between the variables. As Figure 2 indicates, the theory in its present form takes account only of a one-way flow of influence for the most part. Though this is justified as a first approximation, there are clearly elements of *feedback* from the distributive system to other basic variables which deserve attention. V. Gordon Childe has directed our attention to one instance of this in writing of the beginnings of civilization in the Middle East five thousand years ago. In his exciting volume, *Man Makes Himself*, Childe argues that in the period prior to 2600 B.C. there was a definitely accelerating curve in the rate of invention

<sup>5</sup> One reader of the manuscript, Peter Carstens, commented that the inclusion of fishing societies would have introduced an important source of additional evidence in support of the general theory. Due to limitation of time and space, this remains a task for the future.

and technological advance. After this date, the rising trend faltered and eventually turned downward, not rising again to any appreciable degree until the Industrial Revolution.<sup>6</sup> In seeking to explain this strange reversal, Childe argues that one of the major reasons was the new pattern of distribution, with the virtual monopolization of the economic surplus by a tiny governing class. Under these conditions, the producers no longer had any incentive to improve the techniques of production, since all the gains were swallowed up by the political elite, and the elite were too far removed from the processes of production to be capable of invention. What is more, they now had almost unlimited reserves of labor at their disposal and therefore had no incentive to seek laborsaving inventions. Thus, the emergence of the new distributive systems associated with agrarian societies seriously weakened the forces promoting technological advance.

If one were to explore the matter carefully, he would also find evidence of feedback to some of the other independent variables in our theoretical system, and these deserve attention no less than the primary patterns of causation. One of the best examples of this is the impact of distributive systems on political institutions, especially in democratic nations, though not there alone. Another is the influence of prestige systems on power systems because, as recent research suggests, prestige systems serve to limit access to power positions.

In short, much remains to be done.

<sup>6</sup> *Man Makes Himself* (London: Watts, 1936), chap. 9.