

Department of Sociology

Learning material

Topic- SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change is ubiquitous. Although earlier social scientists often treated stability as normal and significant social change as an exceptional process that required a special explanation, scholars now expect to see change at all times and in all social organizations. Much of this type of change is continuous; it occurs in small increments and reveals long-term patterns such as growth. Discontinuous changes, however, are more common than has been assumed. From the perspective of individual organizations, these changes are relatively common and often result in sharp departures from previous states such as when corporations are created, merged, or terminated. From the perspective of larger populations of such organizations, relatively few discontinuous changes result in comparably sharp departures from long-term patterns and trends. Even revolutions that result in dramatic changes of political and legal institutions generally do not transform all of society equally. Some previous patterns continue; others are restored.

Cumulative social change must be distinguished from recurrent fluctuations and the processual aspect of all social life. Both sociologists and historians study the latter by focusing on those dynamic processes through which the social lives of particular individuals and groups may change even though overall patterns remain relatively constant. Marriages and divorces are major changes in social relationships, but a society may have a roughly constant marriage or divorce rate for long periods. Similarly, markets involve a continuous flow of changes in regard to who possess money or goods, who stands in the position of creditor or debtor, who is unemployed or employed, and so forth. These specific changes, however, generally do not alter the nature of the markets. Researchers both study the form of particular transactions and develop models to describe the dynamics of large scale statistical aggregations of such processes (see "Social Dynamics.")

As Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Giddens (1986) suggest, it is necessary to see human social life as always being structured, but incompletely so. "Structuration," to use their term, is as much a process of change as a reflection of stability. Indeed, the existence of stable social patterns over long periods requires at least as much explanation as does social change. This situation has led to renewed attention to social reproduction, or the ways in which social patterns are re-created in social action. This contrasts with earlier views of

continuity as a matter of inertia or simple endurance. Some continuity in the social order is achieved intentionally by actors with enough power to resist changes desired by others; rulers thus maintain their rule by force. Much social reproduction, however, works at a less consciously intentional level and is based on the ways in which people learn to think and act rather than on overt, material force. Bourdieu and Parson (1977), for example, follow Weber in studying the ways in which ingrained, habitual ways of deciding what new action fits an individual's situation work without conscious intention to reproduce overall social patterns. A pattern of inequality in educational attainment that is understood officially as meritocratic and is genuinely intended by teachers to be so thus may be reproduced in part because students from non-elite backgrounds unconsciously lower their expectations for themselves, expecting elites to do better. Teachers may unconsciously do the same thing. When decisions are to be made, such as whether to go to university, or which university to choose, elite students and their families are more likely to have the confidence and knowledge to invest in options with a higher long-term payoff.

To understand social change, thus, it is necessary also to understand what produces social continuity. It would be a mistake to explain social change always in terms of a new factor that intervenes in an otherwise stable situation. Rather, social change commonly is produced by the same factors that produce continuity. These factors may change in quantity or quality or in relation to each other.

Sometimes, however, specific processes of social life undergo long-term transformations. These transformations in the nature, organization, or outcomes of the processes are what is usually studied under the label "social change." Social life always depends, for example, on the processes of birth and death that reproduce populations through generations. These rates (adjusted for the age of a population) may be in equilibrium for long periods, resulting in little change in the overall size of a population. Alternatively birthrates may exceed death rates most of the time, resulting in gradual population growth, but periodic disasters such as war, famine, and pestilence may cut the population back. In this case, the population may show little or no cumulative growth, but instead exhibit a dynamic equilibrium in which every period of gradual increase is offset by one of rapid decline. Approximations to these two patterns characterize most of world history. Population growth generally has been quite slow, although periodic declines have not offset all the increases. In the last three hundred years, however, a new phenomenon has been noted. As societies industrialize and generally grow richer and change the daily lives of their members, they undergo a "fertility transition." First, improvements in nutrition, sanitation, and health

can allow people to live longer. This results in population growth that can be very rapid if the improvements are introduced together rather than gradually developing over a long period. After a time lag, this encourages people to have fewer children because more of the children they do have survive. As fertility rates (birthrates standardized by the number of women of child-

bearing age) also drop, a new equilibrium may be reached; population growth will slow or stop. This is a cumulative transition, because after it, the typical rates of birth and death are much lower even though the population may be much larger. A variety of other changes may follow from or be influenced by this process. For example, family life may change with declining

numbers of children, parents' (especially mothers') lives are likely to change as fewer of their years are devoted to bearing and raising children, and childhood deaths may become rarities rather than common experiences.

Social history is given its shape by such cumulative social changes. Many of these changes are quite basic, such as the creation of the modern state; others are more minor, such as the invention and spread of the handshake as a form of greeting. Most, such as the development of team sports, fast food restaurants, and the international, academic conference, lie in the broad area in between. Thus, cumulative social changes may take place on a variety of different scales, from the patterns of small group life through institutions such as the business corporation or church to overall societal arrangements. Significant changes tend to have widespread repercussions, however, and so it is rare for one part of social life to change dramatically without changing other parts.

While certain important changes, such as an increasing population, are basically linear, others are discontinuous. There are two senses of discontinuity. The first is abruptness, such as the dramatic contraction of the European population in the wake of plague and other calamities of the fourteenth century and the occurrence of the Russian Revolution after centuries of tsarist rule and failed revolts. Second, some social changes alter not just the values of variables but the relationship of variables to each other. Thus, for much of history the military power and wealth of a ruler was based directly on the number of his or her subjects; growing populations meant an increasing total product from which to extract tribute, taxes, and military service. With the transformation first of agriculture and then of industrial production in the early capitalist era or just before it, this relationship was in many cases upset. Increasingly, from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, for example, the heads of Scottish clans found that a small population raising sheep could produce more wealth than could a large one farming; their attempt to

common in societies that have undergone broad patterns of social change in the modern era. In China, after the death of Mao Zedong leaders decided that strengthening the country and improving people's lives depended on technological advancement and economic development. Recognizing both that large armies would not win wars against enemies with technologically advanced weapons and that rapid population growth would make it difficult to educate the whole population and produce rapid economic growth, Deng Xiaoping and other leaders introduced policies to reduce population growth rates. They also decided that they needed to liberalize the economy and encourage private business because state-owned enterprises could not innovate rapidly enough. On the one hand, they encourage innovation in economy and technology, and on the other hand, they resist change in politics and culture. Although perhaps contradictory, these two responses have been typical of leaders in societies undergoing the process of modernization. Although it is impossible to prevent major changes in technology and the economy from having an impact on politics and

maximize this advantage contributed to the migration of Scots to Ireland and America. This process was of course linked also to growing demand for wool and the development of the industrial production of textiles. Those factors in turn involved new divisions of social labor and increased long-distance trade. At the same time, the development of industrial production and related weapons technologies reduced the military advantages of large population size by contrast to epochs when wars generally were won by the largest armies; indeed, population may be inversely related to power if it impedes industrialization.

This case provides an example of how shifts in the relationships of certain variables can alter not only overall social patterns but broad cultural orientations to social change. Along with industrialization (and other dimensions of modern social life) has come a continuous process of technological and social innovation. As Weber (1922) emphasized, this process is at odds with a traditional orientation to social life. Traditionalism implies an expectation of continuity and respect for the ways in which things have always been done. Constant innovation is linked to the pursuit of more efficient ways to do things and an expectation of continuous change. Leaders of China, long thought the absolute size of armies would be decisive in conflict. They were shocked when both Japan and Western powers were able to win victories in the nineteenth century mainly on the basis of superior technology rather than superior size. This helped produce not only the collapse of a specific imperial dynasty but a crisis in a whole pattern of traditionalism. Instead of assuming that the best lessons for military strategy lay in the teachings of the past, some leaders recognized that they needed to look for new ways in which to make the country strong. This produced a tension between trying to preserve cultural identity by continuing to do things the same way and trying to achieve technological and other gains by innovating. This tension is

culture, it is possible to shape what those impacts will be.

Sociologists generally have taken three approaches to studying cumulative social changes. The first is to look for generalizable patterns in how all sorts of changes occur, the second is to seek an explanation for the whole overall pattern of history, and the third is to analyze historically specific processes of change.

Following the first of these approaches, sociologists have looked for characteristic phases through which any social innovation must pass, such as skepticism, experimentation, early diffusion among leaders, and later general acceptance. Ogburn ([1922] 1950) was a pioneer in this sort of research, examining topics such as the characteristic "lag" between cultural innovations and widespread adjustments to them or exploitation of their potential. In regard to the fertility transition, when improved health care and nutrition make it possible for nearly all children to survive to adulthood, it takes a generation or two before parents stop having large families as "insurance policies" to provide for support in their old age. Earlier researchers

often hoped to find general laws that would explain the duration of such lags and account for other features of all processes of social change. Contemporary sociologists tend to place much more emphasis on differences among various kinds of social change and their settings; accordingly, their generalizations are more specific. Researchers may limit their studies to the patterns of innovation among business organizations, for example, recognizing that those organizations may act quite differently from others. They also may ask questions such as, Why do innovations gain acceptance more rapidly in formal organizations (e.g., businesses) than in informal, primary groups (e.g., families), or what sorts of organizations are more likely to innovate? The changes may be very specific, such as the introduction of new technologies of production, or very general, such as the Industrial Revolution as a whole (Smelser 1958). The key distinguishing feature of these sorts of studies is that they regard changes as individual units of roughly similar sorts and aim to produce generalizations about them.

The second major sociological approach to cumulative change—seeking an explanation for the whole pattern of accumulation was long the province of philosophies of history that culminated in the sweeping syntheses of the

especially the oscillating dominance of ideational (spiritual, intellectual) and sensate (sensual, materialist) orientations. More recently, sociologists have identified cycles in social movements and collective action (Tilly 1989; Tarrow 1998; Traugott, 1995).

Both historical materialism and evolutionism are indebted to another ancient idea, that of progress. Here the idea is that social change tends to produce a pattern of improvements in human life as measured in relationship to a standard of evaluation. In this regard, sociological evolutionism has commonly differed from evolutionary theory in biology, which has been less focused on the overall direction of change and normative evaluation. The great nineteenth-century evolutionary thinkers Comte (1830-42) [1851-1854] (1975) and Spencer (1893) conceptualized history as progress through a series of stages. Comte based his analysis on what he saw as improvements in social knowledge through theological, metaphysical, and positive stages. Spencer, who was also an originator of evolutionary theory in biology, had a much more complex and sophisticated theory, focusing on the way structures developed to meet functional imperatives and gaining direction from the idea that "incoherent homogeneity" progressively gives way to "coherent heterogeneity" through the process of structural differentiation. Spencer (1893) addressed particularly the transition from military to industrial societies, which he saw as basic to modernity. Durkheim (1893) developed a similar analysis in his description of the movement from mechanical to organic solidarity.

[¹Schrecker (1991) has analyzed a pattern in which something similar to Spencer's two stages alternated cyclically in Chinese society rather than forming the basis for a single evolutionary trend. Periods of increasing industrialization and commercialization were followed by eras in

nineteenth century. Sociology was born partly out of the attempt to understand the rise of science, industry, and urban society. These and related transitions were conceptualized in frameworks that emphasized shifts from tradition to modernity, feudalism to capitalism, and monarchy to republicanism or democracy. As Sztompka (1993) points out, three basic visions were developed, each of which has left a mark on sociology and continues to be influential in research: cycles, evolutionary progress, and historical materialism. The roots of the cyclical vision stretch back to antiquity. The image of the human life cycle, from birth and infancy to old age and death, for example, was used to conceptualize the rise and fall of whole societies and of imperial dynasties that were thought to be vigorous in youth and feeble in old age. Few scientific sociologists have regarded such images as more than metaphors, but they have been influential among writers attempting to generalize about the course of history (e.g., Spengler [1918] 1939; Toynbee 1934—1961). A number of sociologists, however, have studied more specific cyclical patterns. Pareto ([1916] 1980) analyzed what he called the circulation of elites, a pattern in which specific groups rose into and then fell from social dominance. Sorokin (1937) analyzed cultural cycle

which agriculture and military prowess figured more prominently. Schrecker (1991) suggests that this intriguing combination of evolutionary and cyclical theories initially was developed by classical Chinese scholars, although it was recast after the importation of Spencerian evolutionary theory.]

Historical materialists, starting with Marx (1863), also analyzed stages in historical development (such as feudalism and capitalism), but with three crucial differences from other evolutionary theories. First, Marx and his followers argued that material factors, especially the mode of production, shape the rest of society and that change is driven largely by improvements in the capacity for material production. Second, following a dialectical logic, Marxists emphasized the internal contradictions within each stage of development. Capitalism, for example, generated tremendous increases in productivity but distributed the resulting wealth so unequally that it was prone to economic crises and social revolutions. Rather than a simple, incremental progress, thus, Marxists saw evolution as taking place in discontinuous breaks marked by clashes and struggles. Third, most versions of Marxist theory gave greater emphasis to human agency or ability consciously to shape the direction of social change than was typical of evolutionary theory. The question of the extent to which evolution can be directed consciously has, however, recently come to the fore of non-Marxist evolutionary theory as well, as in the work of the sociobiologist Wilson (Wilson and Wilson 1999).

The most important contemporary theories of social evolution attempt to generate not only overall descriptions of stages but causal explanations for social change. Lenski, for example, has argued that increases in technological capacity (including information processing as well as material production and distribution) account for most of the major

changes in human social organization (Lenski et al. 1994). In his synthesis, Lenski arranges the major forms of human societies in a hierarchy based on their technological capacity and shows how other features, such as their typical patterns of religion, law, government, class inequality, and relations between the sexes, are rooted in those technological differences. In support of the idea that there is an overall evolutionary pattern, Lenski et al. (1994) point to the tendency of social change to move only in one direction.

There is room for human ingenuity to determine the shape of the future through a wide range of potential differences in invention and innovation. There are a number of other important versions of the evolutionary approach to cumulative social change. Some stress different material factors, such as human adaptation to ecological constraints (Harris 1979; White 1949); others stress culture and other patterns of thought more than material conditions (Parsons 1968; Habermas 1978).

Adherents to the third major approach to cumulative social change argue that there can be no single evolutionary explanation for all the important transitions in human history. They also stress differences as well as analogies among particular instances of specific sorts of change (Stinchcombe 1978). These historians and historical sociologists emphasize the importance of dealing adequately with particular changes by locating them in their historical and cultural contexts and distinguishing them through comparison (Abrams 1982; Skocpol 1984; Calhoun 1995, 1998). Weber was an important pioneer of this approach. A prominent variety of Marxism has stressed the view that Marx's mature analysis of capitalism emphasizes historical specificity rather than the use of the same categories to explain all of history (Postone 1993). Historical sociologists have argued that a particular sort of transformation, such as the development of the capacity for industrial production, may result from different causes and have different implications on different occasions. The original Industrial Revolution in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain thus developed with no advance model and without competition from established industrial powers. Countries that are industrializing today are influenced by both models and competition from existing industrial countries, along with influences from multinational corporations. The development of the modern world system thus fundamentally altered the conditions of future social changes, making it misleading to lump together cases of early and late industrialization for the purpose of generalization. Similarly, prerequisites for industrial production may be supplied by different institutional formations; one should compare not just institutions but different responses to similar problems.

Accident and disorder also have played crucial roles in the development of the modern world system. Wallerstein (1974—1988) shows

Thus, there are many cases of agricultural states being transformed into industrial societies but very few (if any) examples of the reverse. Of course, Lenski acknowledges that human evolution is not completely irreversible; he notes, however, not only that cases of reversal are relatively few but that they commonly result from an external cataclysm. Similarly, Lenski indicates that the direction of human social evolution is not strictly dictated from the start but only channeled in certain direction.

the centrality of historical conjunctures and contingencies: the partially random relationships between different sorts of events (on historical accidents, see also Simmel 1977; Boudon 1986). For example, the outcome of military battles between Spain (an old-fashioned empire) and Britain (the key industrial-capitalist pioneer) were not foregone conclusions. There was room for bravery, weather, strategy, and a variety of other factors to play a role. However, certain key British victories, notably in the sixteenth century, helped make not only British history but world history different by creating the conditions for the modern world system to take the shape it did. Against evolutionary explanation, historical sociologists also argue that different factors explain different transformations. Thus, no amount of study of the factors that brought about the rise of capitalism and industrial production can provide the necessary insight into the decline of the Roman Empire and the eventual development of feudalism in Europe or the consolidation of China's very different regions into the world's most enduring empire and most populous state. These different kinds of events have their own different sorts of causes.

Predictably, some sociologists seek ways to combine some of the benefits of each type of approach to explaining cumulative social change. Historical sociologists who emphasize the singularity of specific transformations can learn from comparisons among such changes and achieve at least partial generalizations about them. Thus, different factors are involved in every social revolution, yet certain key elements seem to be present, such as crises (financial as well as political) in a government's capacity to rule (Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991). This recognition encourages one to focus on structural factors that may help create potentially revolutionary situations as well as the ideologies and actions of specific revolutionaries. Similarly, even though a variety of specific factors may determine the transition to capitalism or industrialization in every instance, some version of a fertility transition seems to play a role in nearly all cases. Although evolutionary theory is widely rejected by historical sociologists, some look to evolutionary arguments for suggestions about what factors might be important. Thus, Lenski's emphasis on technology and Marx's focus on the relationship of production and class struggle can provide foci for research, and that research can help determine

whether those factors are equally important in all societal transformations and whether they work the same way in each one. More radically, evolutionary sociology might follow biology in focusing less on the selection of whole populations (societies) for success or failure and look instead at the selection of specific social practices (e.g., the bearing of large numbers of children) for reproduction or disappearance. Such an evolutionary theory might provide insight into how practices become more or less common, following biology in looking for mechanisms of reproduction and inheritance, the initiation of new practices (mutation), and the clustering of practices in interacting groups (speciation) as well as selection. It would, however, necessarily give up the capacity to offer a single explanation for

all the major transitions in human social history, which is one of the attractions of evolutionary theory to its adherents.

Certain basic challenges are particularly important in the study of cumulative social change today. In addition to working out a satisfactory relationship among the three main approaches, perhaps the most important challenge is to distinguish social changes that are basic from those which are ephemeral or less momentous. Sociologists, like historians and other scholars, need to be able to characterize broad patterns of social arrangements. This is what sociologists do when they speak of "modernity" or "industrial society." Such characterizations involve at least implicit theoretical claims about the crucial factors that distinguish these eras or forms. In the case of complex, large scale societal processes, these factors are hard to pin down. How much industrial capacity does a society need to have before one can call it industrial? How low must employment in its increasingly automated industries become before one can call it postindustrial? Is current social and economic globalization the continuation of a longstanding trend or part of a fundamental transformation? Although settling such questions is difficult, debating them is crucial, for sociologists cannot grasp the historical contexts of the phenomena they study if they limit themselves to studying particulars or seeking generalizations from them without attempting to understand the differences among historical epochs (however hard to define sharply) and cultures (however much they may shade into each other with contact). Particularly because of the many current contentions that humanity stands on the edge of a new age— postmodern, postindustrial, or something else— researchers and theorists need to give strong answers to the question of what it means to claim that one epoch ends and another begins (Calhoun 1999).

Many prominent social theorists have treated all of modernity as a continuous era and stressed its distinction from previous (or anticipated future) forms of social organization. Durkheim (1893) argued that a new, more complex division of labor is central to a dichotomous distinction of modern (organic solidarity) from pre-modern (mechanical solidarity) society. Weber (1922) saw Western rationalization of action and relationships as basic and as continuing without rupture through the whole modern era. Marx (1863) saw the transition from feudalism to capitalism as basic but held that no change in modernity could be considered fundamental unless it overthrew the processes of private capital accumulation and the commodification of labor. Recent Marxists thus argue that the social and economic changes of the last several decades mark a new phase within capitalism but not a break with it (Mandel 1974; Wallerstein 1974—1988; Harvey 1989). Many sociologists would add a claim about the centrality of increasing state power as a basic, continuous process of modernity (e.g., Tilly 1990; Mann 1986—1993). More generally, Habermas (1984—1988) has stressed the split between a life world in which everyday interactions are organized on the basis of mutual agreement and an increasingly prominent systemic integration through the impersonal relationships of money and power outside the reach of linguistically mediated cooperative understanding. Common to all these positions is the notion that there is a general process (not just a static set of attributes) common to all forms of modernity. Some claim to discern a causal explanation; others only point to the trends, suggesting that those trends may have several causes but that there is no single "prime mover" that can explain an overall pattern of evolution. All would agree that no really basic social change can be said to have occurred until the fundamental processes they identify have ended, been reversed, or changed their relationship to other variables. Obviously, a great deal depends on what processes are considered fundamental.

Rather than stressing the common processes that organize all forms of modernity, some scholars have followed Marx (and recent structuralist

theory) in pointing to the disjunctures between relatively stable periods. Foucault (1973), for example, emphasized basic transformations in the way knowledge is constituted and an order is ascribed to the world of things, people, and ideas. Renaissance culture was characterized by an emphasis on resemblances among the manifold different elements of God's single, unified creation. Knowledge of fields as diverse to modern eyes as biology, aesthetics, theology, and astronomy was thought to be unified by the matching of similar characteristics, with those in each field serving as visible signs of counterparts in the others. The "classical" modernity of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries marked a radical break by treating the sign as fundamentally distinct from the thing it signified, noting, for example, that words have only arbitrary relationships to the objects they name. The study of representation thus replaced that of resemblances. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, another rupture came with the development of the modern ideas of classification according to hidden, underlying causes rather than superficial resemblances and an examination of human beings as the basic source of systems of representation. Only this last period could give rise to the "human sciences"—psychology, sociology, and so forth—as they are known today. Similarly,

Foucault (1977) argued that the modern individual is a distinctive form of person or self, produced by an intensification of disciplining power and surveillance. Where most theories of social change emphasize processes, Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" emphasizes the internal coherence of relatively stable cultural configurations and the ruptures between them.

Foucault's work has been taken as support for the claim (which was not his own) that the modern era has ended. Theories of "postmodernity" commonly argue that at some point the modern era gave way to a successor, though some scholars (e.g., Lyotard 1977) have indicated, against the implications of the label "postmodern," that they mean not a simple historical succession but a recurrent internal challenge to the dominant "modernist" patterns (see Lash 1990; Seidman 1995; Harvey 1989; Calhoun 1995). Generally, they hold that where modernity was rigid, linear, and focused on universality, postmodernity is flexible, fluidly multidirectional, and focused on difference. Some postmodernist theories emphasize the impact of new production technologies (especially computer-assisted flexible automation), while others are more exclusively cultural. The label "postmodernity" often is applied rather casually to point to interesting features of the present period without clearly

indicating why they should be taken as revealing a basic discontinuous shift between eras.

At stake in debates over the periodization of social change is not just the labeling of eras but the analysis of what factors are most fundamentally constitutive of social organization. Should ecology and politics be seen as determinative over, equal to, or derivative of the economy? Is demography or technological capacity prior to the other? What gives capitalism, feudalism, a kinship system, or

any other social order its temporary and relative stability? Such questions must be approached not just in terms of manifest influence at any single point in time or during specific events but also in terms of the way particular factors figure in long term processes of cumulative social change.

Reference

