

SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The rapid, far-reaching social change that the world is currently experiencing did not “just happen.” It is the result of forces set into motion thousands of years ago. Transforming the course of human history, social change—the alteration of culture and societies over time—is a vital part of social life.

HOW SOCIAL CHANGE TRANSFORMS SOCIAL LIFE ?

Social change is a shift in the characteristics of culture and societies over time. There have been four social revolutions: the domestication of plants and animals, from which pastoral (rural) and horticultural societies arose; the invention of the plow, leading to agricultural societies; the invention of the steam engine which led to the industrial revolution and produced industrial societies; and now the information revolution, stimulated by the invention of the microchip. Another type of society is emerging based on biotechnology.

The shift from agricultural to industrial economic activity was accompanied by a change from *Gemeinschaft* (daily life centers on intimate and personal relationships) to *Gesellschaft* (people have fleeting, impersonal relationships) societies. Different sociologists have focused on different forces in order to explain the changes that took place in society at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Karl Marx identified capitalism as the basic reason behind the breakup of feudal (agricultural) societies. He focused his analysis on the means of production (factories, machinery, and tools): those who owned them dictated the conditions under which workers would work and live. This development set in motion antagonistic relationships between capitalists and workers that remain today.

Max Weber saw religion as the core reason for the development of capitalism: as a result of the Reformation, Protestants no longer felt assured that they were saved by virtue of church membership and concluded that God would show visible favor to the elect. This belief encouraged Protestants to work hard and be thrifty. An economic surplus resulted, stimulating industrialization.

Modernization (the change from agricultural to industrial societies) refers to the sweeping changes in societies brought about by the Industrial Revolution. When technology changes, societies change. An example today would be how technology from the industrialized world is transforming traditional societies. Global divisions of power began to emerge in the sixteenth century; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, capitalism and industrialization extended the economic and political ties among the world's nations.

World system theory asserts that because those nations that were not industrialized became dependent on those that had industrialized, they were unable to develop their own resources. Since World War II, a realignment of the world's powers has created a triadic division of the globe, led by Japan, Germany, and the United States. These three powers along with Canada, France, Great Britain, and Italy formed G7 in an effort to forge agreements on global dominance. Russia joined the G7 and it is now known as the G8. These world powers set policies to perpetuate their global dominance—particularly trying to maintain access to abundant, cheap oil.

G8 faces three major threats: (1) dissension within; (2) the resurgence of China; and (3) the resurgence of ethnic rivalries and conflicts. For global control, G8 requires political and economic stability, both in their own countries and in the countries that provide the raw materials they need. The global powers have come to the realization that African poverty and political corruption breed political unrest that can have damaging consequences..

THEORIES AND PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Theories that focus on cultural evolution are either unilinear or multilinear.

Unilinear theories assume that all societies follow the same path, evolving from simple to complex through uniform sequences. One version of this theory proposed by Lewis Morgan, said that all societies go through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. **Multilinear theories** replaced unilinear theories and assume that different routes can lead to a similar stage of development; thus societies need not pass through the same sequence of stages to become industrialized. Both unilinear and multilinear theories assume the idea that societies progress toward a higher state. However, because of the crises in Western culture today, this assumption has been cast aside and evolutionary theories have been rejected.

Theories of natural cycles examine great civilizations, not a particular society; they presume that societies are like organisms: they are born, reach adolescence, grow old, and die.

1. Toynbee proposed that civilization is initially able to meet challenges, yet when it becomes an empire, the ruling elite loses its capacity to keep the masses in line “by charm rather than by force,” and the fabric of society is then ripped apart.
2. Oswald Spengler proposed that Western civilization was on the wane; some analysts think the crisis in Western civilization may indicate he was right.

Marx’s conflict theory viewed social change as a dialectical process in which the following occurs:

A thesis (a current arrangement of power) contains its own antithesis (a contradiction or opposition), and the resulting struggle between the thesis and its antithesis leads to a synthesis (a new arrangement of power).

William Ogburn identified three processes of social change.

1. *Inventions* can be either material (computers) or social (capitalism)
2. *Discovery* is a new way of seeing reality (Columbus’ “discovery” of North America)
3. *Diffusion* is the spread of an invention, discovery, or idea from one area to another.
4. Ogburn coined the term “cultural lag” to describe the situation in which some elements of a culture adapt to an invention or discovery more rapidly than others. We are constantly trying to catch up with technology by adapting our customs and ways of life to meet its needs.

HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING OUR LIVES

Technology refers to both the tools used to accomplish tasks and to the skills or procedures to make and use those tools. Technology is an artificial means of extending human abilities. Although all human groups use technology, it is the chief characteristic of postindustrial societies because it greatly extends our abilities to retrieve and analyze information, communicate, and travel. The sociological significance of technology, is how technology changes our way of life. The computer is an example of how technology shapes our lives. Within the field of education, computers are transforming the way children from kindergarten through college learn. Distance learning will become such a part of mainstream education that most students will take at least some of their high school, college and graduate courses through this arrangement.

In the world of business and finance, computers have made national borders meaningless, as vast amounts of money are instantly transferred from one country to another. The way wars are fought has also changed because of computers. Some people have reservations about our computerized society.

1. Fears range from cyber crime—such as identity theft, to fearing that the government will be able to exert complete control over us.
2. Cyberspace may create social inequality. On the national level, we could end up with “information have-nots,” primarily inner-city residents cut off from the flow of information. On the global level, unequal access to advanced technology may put the Least Industrialized Nations at a disadvantage.