Social Continuity and Change and Social Theory Snapshot

by Christine Preston

I will begin by defining social and cultural continuity and change. The term 'social change' is a term used within sociology and applies to modifications in social relationships or culture (the term 'cultural change' is the term used within anthropology). Since society and culture are interdependent, 'sociocultural change' is a more accepted term. The study of sociocultural change is the systematic study of variation in social and cultural 'systems'. There are inherent methodological problems of identification and measurement of change, and rarely does one cause produce one effect. All societies are involved in a process of social change, however, this change may be so incremental that the members of the society are hardly aware of it. People living in very traditional societies would be in this category. Societies are characterised by change: the rate of change, the processes of change, and the directions of change.

The actions of individuals, organisations and social movements have an impact on society and may become the catalyst for social change. The actions of individuals, however, occur within the context of culture, institutions and power structures inherited from the past, and usually, for these individuals to effect dramatic social change, the society itself is 'ripe' for change.

Broad social trends, for example, shifts in population, urbanisation, industrialisation and bureaucratisation, can lead to significant social change. In the past, this has been associated with modernisation, the process whereby a society moves from traditional, less developed modes of production (like small-scale agriculture) to technologically advanced industrial modes of production. Trends like population growth and urbanisation have a significant impact on other aspects of society, like social structure, institutions and culture. Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century social theorists focused fairly extensively on modernisation, but they tended to present on oversimplified "grand narrative" which resulted from heavily ideological interpretations of the contrast between tradition and modernisation. They also attempted to externalise absolutes, "social laws" as they saw them, and they argued that these social laws were operative in structurally similar societies.

Social continuity cannot simply be defined as the absence of social change, that is, things remaining the same, because social change is a continual process in all societies. Nothing "remains the same". However, within societies there are structures that are inherently resistant to change, and in this sense, we can talk about them as being social continuities. Individuals within societies need social continuities to a lesser or greater extent, depending on significant factors like age, gender, education, access to power, wealth, vested interest, etc. Even "rock-solid" institutions like the family, the law, and religions are subject to change, even though they represent social continuity. There has always been 'family' and it is still the foundational institution for society and the primary agent of socialisation, however the composition of 'family' has changed in recent years, leading to different kinds of families and different socialisation experiences for their members. The same ideas can be applied to law and religion.
Social and cultural continuities can be likened to individuals' habits - comfortable patterns of behaviour that give individuals a sense of security and personal control - a haven or a respite in a sea of social and cultural change. There is a high correlation between the rate of social and cultural change and resistance to that change. In times when members of a society feel that change is 'out of control', it is likely that the desire for continuity becomes more extreme, resulting in backward-looking idealisations of the past.

While social change is itself a continuity, certain periods of human history have created "great transformations" (Polanyi 1973). The Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution created one such Great Transformation. Polanyi saw it as beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries and continuing today, characterised by:

- the rise of a capitalist, global economy and growth in production and wealth
- a 'scientific revolution' - new ways of thinking about causation, moving from religious to secular
- a new concept of time
- population growth, immigration and urbanisation
- a political move to 'nation', which involved governments expanding their control to social, economic and cultural life, followed by the extension of that control to other, less advanced countries (colonialism/imperialism) either through military conquest or trade conquest and today, perhaps, characterised by conquest through communication (eg. the Americanisation or westernisation of culture).

According to Bessant and Watts (1999: 20):

"A key sign of the magnitude of the changes in that first Great Transformation is found in the ways people continued talking about the experience of loss, 'the world we have lost'. Phrases like 'the death of God', 'demise of the family, and the 'loss of community' reflect the long-standing feelings of bereavement and loss that accompanied the modernising experience.

Polanyi would argue that similar feelings of loss and bereavement are expressed, in similar terms, today in our post-modern society where rapid, often dramatic change has become almost the norm.

Although many individuals, for example, Marx, Toennies, Comte and Spencer developed different versions of what Comte called 'sociology', the 'science of society', it wasn't until the late 19th century that sociology was established as an academic discipline. Social theories came out of this 'new' discipline, as attempts to explain, or account for, social change. Social theories were, and still are today, products of their times and are characterised to a greater or lesser extent by the prevailing views and ideologies of their eras. When studying social theories, and using one or more of them in an attempt to explain social and cultural change, it is important to recognise this fact about them and to be conscious, if not critical, of the biases, values and assumptions inherent in them.

Sociological theory can be roughly divided into periods during which different schools of theoretical thought tended to be dominant:
• from the late Nineteenth/early Twentieth Century until the 1920s, while Sociology was establishing itself as an academic discipline in its own right (there was, at the same time, a development of Anthropology) 'Social Darwinism', early evolutionary theory, which was functionalist in its perspective, was a dominant school of thought
• the 1940s -1960s was the era of 'Structural Functionalism' (Parsons, Spencer, Durkheim and Comte)
• by the mid-1960s (1960s - 1980s), Marxism, Weberian sociology, Feminism and Symbolic Interactionism were dominant
• most recently, Post-Modernism (also called Post-Structuralism) has tended to dominate sociological thinking.

This division isn't absolute in that different schools of sociological thought agreed with, disagreed with, borrowed and rejected aspects of each other's premises. Even within the different schools of thought, there is acceptance and rejection of other proponents' ideas.

**An Overview of Some Social Theories**

Early Evolutionary Theory This theory of social change was based on the assumption that all societies develop from simple, 'small-scale' beginnings into more complex industrial and post-industrial societies. This development process was thought to be unilinear, that is, there was one line of development from simple to complex. It also assumed that the changes inherent in this development were all 'progress'. This theory emerged around the time Charles Darwin was publishing his theories on the origin of species; that biological species evolved from the simple to the complex and that there was 'survival of the fittest'. Evolutionary theorists applied these ideas to societies - a concept which fitted very comfortably with this colonial era when Britain and other colonising countries were heavily involved in bringing their "superior" advanced form of society to more "primitive" societies, in exchange for their raw materials, trade goods, etc. Ethnocentrism was rife during this period and early Evolutionary theorists reflected the prevailing ideology, legitimising, through their theoretical explanation of social change, the political and economic ambitions of the colonial powers. Early evolutionary theory described change, rather than explained it and ignored the many patterns of development which were occurring - which were, in reality, as diverse as the countries themselves.

While Early Evolutionary Theory became discredited once anthropological data was published describing the diversity of change in modernising societies, Modern Evolutionary Theory still exists. This more updated version sees sociocultural evolution as the tendency for social structures to become more complex over time. It also acknowledges that this process in multilinear and that change occurs in different ways and at different rates. Modern Evolutionary Theory concedes that change is not always necessarily progress, and that it will not inevitably produce greater happiness for all the people concerned. Unlike Early Evolutionary Theory, Modern Evolutionary Theory does attempt to explain change, arguing that the main source of change is a shift in subsistence/production, each change resulting in greater productivity, which in turn leads to greater economic surplus and thus more distributable wealth. This leads to improved living standards, population growth, cultural diversity and further development.
Functionalist Theory (often called Structural Functionalism): Functionalist theory assumes, on the whole, that as societies develop, they become increasingly more complex and interdependent. Functionalist theory emphasizes social order rather than social change. Talcott Parsons viewed society as consisting of interdependent parts which work together to maintain the equilibrium of the whole, rather like the human body with its interdependent organs working for the health of the entire organism. Key concepts of this theory are those of differentiation and integration. Differentiation occurs as society becomes more complex but the new institutions must be integrated with each other into the whole. In other words, change occurs (differentiation of institutions, for example, to take over functions of previously non-differentiated institutions) but structures within society change or emerge to compensate. The new structures are integrated to ensure the smooth functioning of society. Social order requires that members of society work towards achieving order and stability within the society and Functionalist Theory asserts that this is the most desirable social state for people. The assumptions are:

- all members accept their roles
- all members accept the moral values of their society
- 'social order' is achieved through complex processes of socialisation, education and sanctions
- history is seen as a series of phases through which societies progress. Each phase is characterized by an increase in rationality
- 'social facts' can be studied as 'objective facts' or 'social laws'

Limitations of this theory are that it really only attempts to explain institutional change. During the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, which were relatively placid, the functionalist view of society as a balanced system that integrated small but necessary changes was quite consistent with the times. However this social theory quickly lost credibility because it proved inadequate to explain the rapid upheaval and social unrest of the late 50s and 60s. Like Early Evolutionary theory, it assumes that change is progress, although there are disagreements between Functionalist theorists.

**Conflict Theory** - Marxism (Marx and Engels) Marxism also saw itself as offering a 'scientific account' of change but, in opposition to Functionalism, this focused on the premise that radical change was inevitable in society. Marxism argued that the potential for change was built into the basic structures of society, the relationships between social classes, which Marx saw as being intrinsic to the social relations of production. According to Marx, eventually society reaches a point where its own organization creates a barrier to further economic growth and at that point, crisis precipitates a revolutionary transformation of the society, for example, from feudalism to capitalism, or from capitalism to socialism. Marxists believed that social order was maintained through socialisation, education and ideology. Thus control is maintained to suit the vested interests of powerful groups and as the interests of these groups change, so does society. Change is therefore ongoing until crisis point is reached and transformation occurs. While Marx focused on class conflict specifically, modern conflict theorists have broadened their explanation of change to social conflict generally. While Conflict Theory is useful in explaining significant events in history and ongoing changing patterns of race and gender relations, it struggles to adequately explain the dramatic impact of technological development on society or the changes to family organisation.

**Symbolic Interactionism**
Symbolic Interactionism developed as an alternative to Functionalism, emphasising that social interaction is symbolic in nature and that social reality is constructed by the people participating in it, rather than by 'external laws' (Herbert Blumer; Peter Berger). This concept follows the Weberian premise that 'social reality' is different from 'natural reality' because it is symbolic and socially constructed. Because Structural Interactionism sees social reality as neither objective nor external (as the natural world is) they reject the idea that social reality is objective and needs to be studied as such. Symbolic Interactionists argue that people give meaning to events and objects and that those people agree about these meanings. It becomes irrelevant what is 'really' happening, because the participants are engaged in interpretive processes and it is these that shape their perceptions of the world. (Participant Observation is a favourite research method of Symbolic Interactionists.)

Post-Modernist Social Theory (also called Post-Structuralism)

Post-Modernism argues that both social reality and knowledge is socially constructed. Post-Modernism rejects 'general' or overarching explanations of change, which rely on the premise of a single total social system or assumptions about class or gender power. Post Modernists see power as dispersed and localised, rather than hierarchical and directed from the top down. For Post-Modernists, there are many 'knowledges' and 'ways of knowing', multiple sets of moral rules and ethics, which people in society tap into at their local level. Authority structures may attempt to assert their knowledge and way of doing things) but they do this, not from any intellectual or moral authority, but through political strategies of coercion (ridicule, exclusion), leading to the use of their definition of 'normal' to define what is 'abnormal'. At the micro-level, the out-group is defined by definition of the in-group. Micropower is located within institutions, which use language and practices to control people. Post-Modernists view society, therefore, not as a total system but as an aggregation of fragments. They see post-modern society as the next phase after modern, post-industrial society, so in this sense Post-Modernists are viewing social change in terms of stages that societies go through. In terms of social theory, they confine their analysis to post-industrial societies and rarely attempt to analyse the whole of society, preferring to focus on its component parts, such as institutions like the family, prisons, hospitals etc.

Recent social theorists, for example, Anthony Giddens (1990), see a crucial distinction between pre-modern and modern societies based on our dependence on increasingly complex and extended social relationships. These rely on 'expert systems' with which we have no face-to-face relationship. In the past, people relied on, or were dependent on, the people with whom they had the closest relationships, for example, spouses, family etc. In modern society, we are increasingly becoming independent within traditional relationships (for example, women pursuing a career path concurrently with their husbands) while becoming increasingly dependent on people with whom we have no relationship (for example, when we catch a plane, we are dependent on the 'expertise' of pilots, ground crews, traffic controllers etc.)

Other recent social theory especially the discussion coming out of America, focuses on forms of collective behaviour as a force for change. While this discussion isn't necessarily formalised as social theory, it is perhaps worthwhile to look at the role of social movements in the change process. For this purpose, "social movement" is defined as a large number of people who come together as part of an organised effort to bring about, or resist, social change. Institutionalised forms of political action are usually important to
these groups in the achievement of their goals. There are several types of these movements, ranging from Reformist or Revolutionary groups, through to Reactionary movements (resisting change rather than working towards change). Study of social movements has ranged from micro-level studies, which examine the motives and aspirations of individuals within these movements, to organisational-level studies. Resource Mobilisation Theory argues that a social movement cannot be sustained simply by discontent with existing structures. The social movement must manipulate discontent and efficiently manage it through the aggregation and distribution of resources (money and labour). For a social movement to succeed, there must be an adequate resource base. This can come from participants directly or 'sponsors'-people or groups outside the social movement who may be sympathetic to the 'cause' (conscience supporters), share common goals with the social group, or have a vested interest in the social movement's success. The social movement must have organisers who can garner this resource support and organise the participants and their activities, utilising existing social infrastructure to achieve the goals of the movement. Resource Mobilisation Theory emphasises the interaction between resource availability, the goal preferences of the movement and the entrepreneurial activities of the organisers in mobilising participants and supporters.

A central fact of recent social theory is the movement away from overarching, 'grand' theory towards the partial, the fragmented. It has been, and still is, problematic to try and construct theories that attempt to explain everything - the relationship between social change and all aspects of society. The 'grand theories' of the past arose out of the ideologies of their periods - it may be said in the future that 'fragmentation' theories like Post-Modernism have come out of what is increasingly becoming the 'me' era. Social theories aren't instruments or tools by which people can examine societies and cultures; they are themselves 'culture', the products of the life experiences and locations and cultural milieu of their proponents. They rely on perspectives, they are open-ended; they are metaphors for societies (Beilharz: 1992). Nevertheless, social theory is important because it attempts to address the human condition in change. Theories generalise, but this does not mean that they should totalise or systematise. Social theory offers a way of operating in the world, helping us clarify norms and values, political and economic understanding and the relationships of these things.

References:

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