

# Understanding the nature of social and Cultural Continuity and Change

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In the Core topic we are required to explore the nature of continuity and change. The syllabus states:

The focus of this study is to understand the nature of social and cultural continuity and change and to examine it, through the application of research methods and social theory, in relation to a selected country.

In other words our task as teachers is to introduce differing ideas to explain change (and continuity). This is an excellent opportunity to build on our work in Year 11 and apply the social theories in a more sophisticated way. These are some theorists, ideas and strategies I have used in class.

## The nature of social and cultural continuity and change (page 37 of syllabus)

*Students develop knowledge and understanding of social and cultural continuity and change by examining:*

- change is a complex process
- 'evolutionary' change
- 'transformative' change
- resistance to change

## Change is a complex process

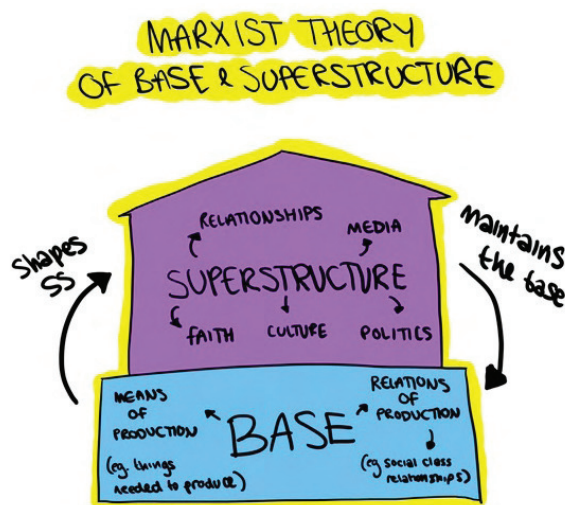
The first principle of understanding change is to realise that it is an attempt to interpret reality using the only available tools to us, language. As a species (*homo sapiens*) we use the tools of language to determine meaning. When this is successful we achieve "symbolic efficiency."<sup>1</sup> However, achieving "symbolic efficiency" becomes increasingly difficult when analysing complex change. We need to overcome a number of key problems to understand change.

1. Agree on a series of concepts to identify, describe and measure change
2. Interpret change using these concepts

During the 1960s it was popular for Marxist (Conflict Theorists) to claim the ascendancy of the economic factor in explaining change. In *The Communist Manifesto*<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx described change as being primarily determined by economic factors. The followers of Karl Marx (the Marxists) agreed upon a series of concepts to describe change. We can summarise these into two key Marxist concepts: the economic base and superstructure.

*"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."*<sup>3</sup>

What this means is that change is determined by the economic base of a society. In other words, to understand how and why a society is changing we need to focus on the economics. For example, to understand changing ideas in a society we need to examine their interaction with the economy. In today's society we are dominated by consumerism and many of our values (even our identity) it inextricably tied to our economy. Whatever sub-culture we belong to requires the development of an identity that can only be fulfilled through consumption: the correct shoes, hat, smart phone and appropriate brands. In the West we are defined by what we buy!



<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/fa/67/ee/fa67ee1dbb4f354a6e710fef-f6407b87.jpg>

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Rex. *The Zizek Dictionary*. Durham: Acumen, 2014. Print.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> accessed on 16/10/2014

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_Contribution\\_to\\_the\\_Critique\\_of\\_Political\\_Economy.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy.pdf) accessed on 16/10/2014.

# Understanding the nature of social and Cultural Continuity and Change (continued)

The Marxists predicted catastrophic future change founded upon their analysis of the economy. They prophesised that capitalism, (the existing economic base) would destroy itself. However, these ideas fell out of favour in the 1960s. One particular Marxist called Althusser claimed that most Marxists had over-simplified change. Althusser argued that change was more complex and was the product of an interaction between the base-superstructure model. In other words, it wasn't the economy that determined change but the interaction between economic and ideological, cultural, social and political factors. Althusser called this process over-determination<sup>4</sup>. Returning to our sub-culture this means that its creation was a product of changing ideas in society, new circumstances as well as the economy. So the hipsters craze is not predominantly economic. It is a result of over-determination, the interaction between fashion, music, ideas and the economy.

The Marxists offer an analysis of change situated within the contradictions and conflicts within society. The key to understanding the Marxist interpretation change (and continuity) is to apply their concepts e.g. base-superstructure but to also recognise that this is a simplified model. Change is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. Althusser offers us a different approach to understanding these complexities. In short...change is a complex process!

## Evolutionary Change

In *The Origins of the Species* Charles Darwin catalogued and categorised plants and animals to reveal patterns of adaption. Each species was faced with an existential threat posed by environmental change or predators. Species that survived were those that were able to adapt and change. These changes were gradual, sometimes over many thousands and even millions of years. *Homo Sapiens* evolved from early hominids, to *Homo Erectus* and eventually into *Homo Sapiens*. We can track a linear pattern of evolutionary change by observing the similarities in physical attributes such as size of the brain, shape of the feet and positioning of the nose. Our early ancestors shared many of our features and we are able to theorise the adaptations necessary from our ancestors to survive and pass on their genes to us.

In society women's rights have evolved gradually. In 1897 women in South Australia received the vote in colony elections. By the 1920s women MPs began to emerge culminating in Julia Gillard's term as Prime Minister in more recent times. We can clearly track this evolutionary change. The Suffragettes and women activists used their earlier victories to build a platform

for later successes. Similarly the Feminist movement evolved in 3 phases. Third generation feminists argue for the de-construction of gender identities. However, this phase of feminism would not have been possible without the sacrifices and hard-fought victories of the earlier pioneering feminists. This is linear evolutionary change, change that appears to be progressive.

**Afghan Ladies Driving School BBC Television** written, filmed and directed by Sean Langan.

Watch <http://www.smh.com.au/tv/Documentary/Afghan-Ladies-Driving-School-4310159.html>

Examine the nature of change in *Afghan Ladies Driving School*. Identify political, social, ideological, cultural and economic changes shown in the documentary.

How can we measure this change? What tools do we need (e.g. methodologies)?

- Design a methodology that you would use to research change in Afghanistan
- Justify your choice of methodology.
- How would you execute your methodology ethically? (Consider the social and cultural context of Afghanistan).

After watching the documentary, research changes in Afghanistan since the intervention in 2003.

Evaluate this change using the model of costs/benefits and winners/losers.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, Louis. For Marx. New York: Pantheon Books, 1969. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Online Dictionary (accessed 16/10/14)

# Understanding the nature of social and Cultural Continuity and Change (continued)

## ACTIVITIES:

### 1. Identify linear evolutionary change in your own micro world?

*What patterns can you see in terms of your development since Year 7?  
(Focus on your emotional, social, cognitive and psychological development)*

### 2. Identify linear evolutionary change in your macro world.

*For example track the changes in terms of indigenous Australians' civil and land rights? Trace the evolving civil and land rights of the indigenous Australians from the civil rights campaigns in the 1960s, land rights, reconciliation and forthcoming recognition in the Constitution.*

### 3. Is the process of indigenous civil and land rights linear evolution? Have indigenous Australians experienced progress?

### 4. Can you identify any issues with the concepts of linear evolution and progress? Give specific examples.

The Animatrix<sup>6</sup> is the prequel to The Matrix. It explains how the machines gradually enslaved the people and used them as a power source. In The Animatrix Part 2 and 3 we witness the machines evolution from automatons to beings with artificial intelligence.

### 5. After watching The Animatrix: The Renaissance Part I and Part II identify the linear pattern of the machines' evolution. Is this progress? Who are the winners/losers and the costs/benefits? Progress for who?

### 6. Watch the excerpt from A Pervert's Guide to Ideology (or Alien 3)<sup>10</sup>

What ghosts haunt us today? How could history have turned out differently? Discuss with a partner a key historical event. Identify elements of chance? Create a scenario based on contingency e.g. chance. What if Kennedy had not been assassinated? What if the Spanish Flu during World War One had ended the war... what would Europe have looked like?

### 7. Is your development a consequence of chance or progression? Adaptation or exaptation?

### 8. Discuss with a partner key moments in your life and examine the role of adaptation and exaptation in your evolution. Linear? Contingent?

### 9. Identify transformative change from your own life. Is there an event or process that has transformed you?

An obvious example is puberty but can you identify this transformative change and explain how you were transformed.

### 10. Drawing upon your studies of History in Years 9 and 10 how has the lives of indigenous Australians been transformed over the last 200 years.?

### 11. Can you identify a contemporary issue where a group has resisted change?

An example would be the Catholic Church's decision to maintain a male only clergy.

### 12. Why has this group resisted change? Were they successful? Can they continue to resist change?

### 13. What change have you resisted in your own life? Why and how did you resist change? Were you successful? Unsuccessful? Explain your answers.

<sup>6</sup> Animatrix 2003, Warner Home Video

<sup>7</sup> Gould, Stephen Jay. Wonderful Life. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. Print.

# Understanding the nature of social and Cultural Continuity and Change (continued)

## Contingent Evolutionary Change

As Society and Culture students we know things are never that simple. Change is not always linear and some theorists have even speculated that evolution is completely random and contingent. Stephen J. Gould's *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*<sup>7</sup> argued against linear evolution. In *Wonderful Life* he argued that linear evolution was the product of scientific categorisation. When Canadian scientist Charles Walcott found molluscs that did not fit into pre-conceived evolutionary categories some of them were conveniently ignored (some were found in drawers years later) or they were shoe horned into existing categories. In other words, it wasn't nature that showed evidence of linear evolution. On the contrary it was Charles Walcott's categorisation.

Stephen J. Gould further examined Cambrian prehistoric molluscs of the Burgess Shale and concluded that evolution was a process of exaptation rather than adaptation. In other words when the pre-historic environment changed the species that survived were not the fittest (e.g. the most well adapted) but the species that had a previously redundant characteristic or feature that now enabled them to survive, exaptation. Gould extended this argument to its natural conclusion and claimed that if we could re-run time, species that had died out previously may have survived.



**The Burgess Shale.**

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/SAN/Exhibit/Darwin.htm>



*Dawn of the Planet of the Apes 2014*  
20th Century Fox<sup>8</sup>

The contingency argument was developed by Zizek. There is a disturbing scene in science fiction movie *Alien 3*<sup>9</sup> when Ripley (the female hero) wanders into a laboratory. In the laboratory we see a series of failed clones of the alien synthesised with Ripley. Most disturbing of all is the half human-half alien species preserved in what appears to be a large jar. Zizek draws the parallel in *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology* claiming that reality is haunted by the ghosts of previous failed attempts at evolution. In simple terms evolution is diverse, uncertain and non-linear. Contingent evolution is a complex process.

Evolutionary change is a complex process (and quite freaky to!)

<sup>8</sup> *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes 2014* 20th Century Fox

<sup>9</sup> *Alien 3 1992* 20th Century Fox

<sup>10</sup> *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology 2013* Zeitgeist Films

# Understanding the nature of social and Cultural Continuity and Change (continued)

## *Transformative and resistance to change*

- 'transformative' change
- resistance to change

## **Transformative change**

Watch <http://www.smh.com.au/tv/Documentary/Afghan-Ladies-Driving-School-4310159.html>

In Afghan Driving School we are invited by the owners of the driving school to observe the women learning to drive. This is a transformative change. The women's lives have been transformed: they have independence, they have new freedoms and they also have access to new employment (assisted by their new driving skills). The men's lives have been transformed: they are alone with women and they allow them to drive.

*This is transformative change.*

## **Resistance to change**

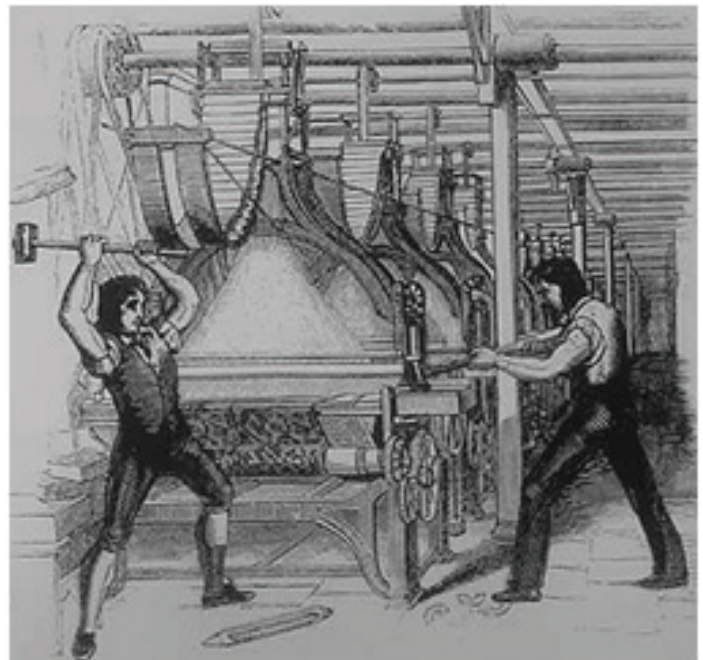
The Luddites were a group of artisans (skilled workers) who lost their jobs due to new machinery and technology. In response they broke into the factories and tried to destroy the new machines. In today's parlance (language) we refer to anyone who **resists technological change** as a Luddite. (I am sure you can think of a few Luddite teachers who have secretly smashed their computer so they can carry on using paper rather than computers!)

In Seattle in 1999 an anti-globalisation movement attempted to resist change. The protestors were marching against the World Trade Organisation and the effects of globalisation.

Resistance can often mean violence.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULtFLAGHiWE>

*This is a resistance to change.*



The Luddites

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<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/FrameBreaking-1812.jpg>