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THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE  
AN EDITED SELECTION FROM THE WRITING  
OF CURRENT AUTHORS

PREPARED BY  
Salem Abd El Aziz M.

Preface by  
W.A. Hassona

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"Opinions Expressed and Positions Taken by Authors  
are Entirely Their Own and do not Necessarily Reflect the  
Views of the Institute of National Planning".



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PREFACE  
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The subject of change has fascinated minds of men throughout recorded history and whole philosophical and theological systems are dependent upon a metaphysic of change. In fact had it not been for the reflections on change of Al-Yazali, the scholasticism of thomas aquinos would have been much less rich.

Paramedies, the Greek and Augustine of Hippo - with his famous statement : "hunc fluens the verflowing now", both viewed change as a process.

Some men have merely philosophised about change and assumed that change was a natural process subject only to the unolterable laws of the Universe. Others are convinced that change (i.e. social change for the betterment of mankind without desecrating that special quality of reverence for life without which any scientist is unworthy of the man social change as a topic of interest captures the mind of modern man with much the sam force as aristotlis distinctions between substontial and accidental change must have enthralled his contemporaries.



This edited selection from the writings of current authors is dedicated to all those agents of change past present and future, who use their knowledge and skill for human progress.

W.A. Hassouna, Dr.Ph.D.

Cairo, UAR

1390 1390

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## **SOCIAL CHANGE\***

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Social change is such a prevalent and often disturbing feature of contemporary life that both the specialist and the layman may be tempted to suppose that it is peculiarly modern. Certainly the extent and rate of change in the modern world are greater than in most past periods, but the static qualities of primitive cultures of archaic civilization are easily and commonly overstated. Change at some level and degree, is as characteristic of man's life in organized systems as is orderly persistence.

Indeed small - scale changes may be an essential component of persistence on a larger scale. For example, given man's biological life cycle, enduring systems, such as kinship organization and government, depend upon orderly patterns of age-specific role performances. Likewise, changing patterns - on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual cycle - provide a basic and predictable continuity to the patterns of social existence.

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\* INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, ed. by David L. Sills, N.Y., Macmillan, The free press, 1968 Volume 14, p.3



Paradoxially, as the rate of social change has accelerated in the real world of experience, the scientific disciplines dealing with man's actions and products have tended to emphasize orderly interdependence and static continuity. The genuine difficulties of dealing with social dynamics are in part responsible for this state of affairs.

The relationship between small - scale and large - scale change and the relationship between short-term and long-term change exemplify the many analytical and factual complexities that are involved. These considerations make a formal definition of social change highly desirable, and we shall therefore attempt one here:

Social change is the significant alteration of social structures (that is, of patterns of social action and interaction) including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct), values, and cultural products and symbols.

This definition encompasses small-scale change, such as the gradual development of a leadership role in a small, task-oriented group; cyclical patterns of change, such as the succession of centralization and decentralization in administrative organization,



and revolutionary change, such as the overthrow of a government. It includes short-term changes in occupational structures; both growth and decline in numbership size of social units; continuous processes such as specialization and bureaucratization ; and discontinuous processes such as particular technical or social inventions.



## SOCIAL CHANGE AND CULTURAL CHANGE

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The broad definition given above comprises both what is commonly identified as social change, which refers mainly to actual human behavior, and cultural change, which refers mainly to culturally meaningful symbols produced by human beings. The emphasis in this discussion will be on the interplay among the complex normative patterns of behavior that we call institutions, since it is these that provide much of the rationale for social control and human activities in general. This emphasis cuts across conventional distinctions between the "social" and the "cultural" aspects of social systems. Cultural change, it is true, requires social actors as agents, and social change is likely to have cultural counterparts. However, changes in certain cultural subsystems - for example, language, the arts, and perhaps theological or philosophical systems - may be viewed in virtual abstraction from concrete human behavior. Similarly, fluctuation in the fashions of dress may be viewed as "autonomous" although it is also proper to consider such fashions as patterns of appropriate conduct in one sphere of social behavior. It is true that such modes of abstraction are often mere matters of convenience. For example, the steady specialization of vocabularies in language systems may be treated as a principle of autonomous evolution; it may be related to the expansion of knowledge



and to role differentiation in complex social systems. However, there is an underlying problem that should be made explicit. The degree to which cultural subsystems, such as language, may be traced to structural sources is a question of considerable theoretical importance. Similarly important is the question of the degree to which such cultural subsystems may be translated into guides for social behavior. In human societies the extent of autonomous variability among coexistent features appears to be substantial. Therefore, a multiplicity of principles relating to structural regularities and to significant alterations is necessary for the understanding of order and change.

It follows from the possibility of autonomous variability and from the initial discussion of small-scale social change that in order to formulate principles of social change we must first of all identify the social structure to which these principles are to be applied. It is also necessary to specify the time period over which change is to be studied and to set up standards for measuring various degrees of change. Until these conditions are fulfilled, we cannot even begin to say what it is that is changing or how much it has changed.



There is no singular, sovereign cause for changes in social systems or subsystems. It is true that the scientific quest for simplification has led to the identification of individual variables, such as technological innovation or population growth, that are important enough in themselves; but the result of these inquiries has been the development of special theories of change for specific classes of structures rather than any kind of master theory that embraces all types of factors.

For small - scale social structure in general - face - to face groups for example, or formal organizations we can safely assume that change will originate through such familiar mechanisms as the normative requirements attached to role performances (Moore 1963, p. 50).

Large scale systems, such as whole societies, are less easily studied; but even on present knowledge we can be confident that population growth or decline and the vicissitudes of incorporating infants into the system through socialization will introduce at least some flexibilities and adjustments, if not major structural change in a definite direction. The probability of both technical and social innovation may be inferred from a universal



feature of human societies which can be called the lack of correspondence between the "Ideal " and the "actual" in the realm of social values. On the whole, these innovations are likely to be directed toward both "adaptation" to the nonhuman environment, to which adjustment is never perfect, and social control of the human population. Recognition of both of these elements can be found in the theories that we now propose to examine.



## CHANGING THEORETICAL INTEREST

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The nineteenth Century predecessors of modern sociology were very preoccupied with the dynamics of social change. Although some scholars, such as Frédéric Le Play, attempted to establish canons for systematic description of contemporary social types, the attempt to trace the paths of history was a far more prevalent concern. Often the history attended to was not universal, but limited to the fairly clear antecedents of European civilization.

Generally these authors attempted to find order in the succession of civilization. The most ambitious of them was probably August Comte, who invented the term "sociology" and propounded a "law of the three stages" - The theological, metaphysical, and positivist - to which all civilization was supposed to conform.



## EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES

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The directionality of change and in particular the increasing complexity and structural differentiation of society, came to be a major tenet of evolutionary theories. Following the impact of Darwin's theories of biological evolution, Herbert Spencer, Lewis Henry Morgan, and others of lesser stature used such Darwinian notions as selective adaptation to account for both the cross - sectional diversity of societies and cultures and the supposedly sequential stages of social organization. By the end of the nineteenth century, evolutionary theory was a dominant factor in social thought, even in the work of writers who were not predominantly evolutionist in outlook.

This applies to theorists as diverse as William Graham Sumner, despite his predominant concern with the relativism of all social values, and Emile Durkheim, whose life long devotion to explaining social phenomena in terms of the balance of an interdependent system has caused him to be indentified with what later became the "functionalist" approach to society.



## MARXIST THEORY

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Even Marxism was a variant of evolutionism, particularly in its adherence to the notion of sequential stages of social organization. The Marxists tried to show how social change came about by laying great stress on the interaction of technology with social organization. Indeed, Marxist thought in its crudest form shared with most evolutionary theory a belief that one stage of social organization succeeded another through the operation of forces that were as impersonal as they were inevitable. Marx himself, however, took fairly full account of the purposive character of social action, he did not rely solely on his theory of revolutionary change. Moreover, his theory was a dynamic one, although it under - played the independent role of ideas and values; thus his intellectual heirs were never caught up in the extremes of static "functionalism" that later became a dominant theme in anthropological and sociological theory.



## FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

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Functionalism is the attempt to explain social phenomena by other social phenomena that are contemporary or quasi - simultaneous.

In this respect, it rejects the "quest for origin" some of its proponents (e.g., Durkheim, Radcliffe - Brown, Malinowski) in eschewing explanation in genetic terms, it also tended to suppress all queries about the actual dynamics of change. For them the demonstration of interdependence between different elements of social structure came to mean the search for self - equilibrating mechanisms in society.

The recent revival of interest in dynamics owes something to all of these precedents. From functionalism, contemporary theory derives not only notions of systemic linkage which may be sequential, but also, through the concept of "dysfunction" some notions of tension and incipient change. However, the renewal of concern with analysis of social change probably owes more to the undeniable facts of contemporary life and particularly to the social scientists "resultant" involvement in studies of modernization. Although functional systems models have served rather well as predictors of eventual expected changes in elements of social structure



held to be related to economic development, the unconfirmed assumption that all fully modern societies have essentially the same kind of social structure can only lead to an unwarranted sociological determinism.

In any event, this mode of analysis has produced a kind of "comparative statics" offering a before and after view curiously discordant with older evolutionary theories; for the functionalists' standard treatment of modernization dwells on pre-existing heterogeneity that becomes in due course a homogeneity. Nevertheless functionalist studies of modernization have at least the merit of demonstrating a serious but fortunately remediable weakness in the analytical models employed, namely, that before and after comparison diverts attention from the mechanisms of change and entirely suppresses inquiries about actual sequences and timetables.



## THE DIRECTIONS OF CHANGE

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In accordance with the position that only "special" theories of social change are appropriate to the diversity of social phenomena, the varieties of directionality in change will each be illustrated empirically. Although many of these have been offered in the past as master principles of social dynamics, the eclectic view here espoused has clear advantages in terms of factual confirmation, even if it thereby loses in simplicity and level of generalization.



## PROGRESS AS AN ASPECT OF GROWTH

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The evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century were also naive in that they exaggerated the cumulative nature of change and comfortably equated change with "progress". However, to some extent the cumulation of which they spoke was real - a point missed by all their relativistic detractors. For various sectors of any social system, and even for entire systems, there is evidence of steady or even accelerating growth over long periods of time. For instance, the growth in the number of rules in continuing organizations is certainly not at a steady rate if very frequent temporal comparisons are made; However, it is probably very steady over somewhat longer intervals. Likewise, the growth in total human population has been variable over considerably longer periods, and yet cumulative over the entire span of man's earthly tenure. Rates of technical innovation are variable according to time and place, although commonly on a cumulative basis. If the invention rate is the unit of observation, its trends may appear nearly cyclical over extensive periods of human history. On the other hand, if the sum total of useful knowledge is taken as the basis of observation the short term variations in the rate addition to stock are likely to appear as very minor fluctuations in the long-term accumulation of reliable knowledge. This is



because the growth of knowledge takes place at an exponential rate. The more there is, the faster it increases.