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Social change

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Contents

The concept and term 'social change' expresses the fact that social structures are in a constant state of flux. However, they do not change concordantly; the political, legal, and cultural spheres (what Karl Marx called the 'superstructure') generally experience a cultural lag (Ogburn 1967) relative to technological developments and innovations in production.

1   Definition and principal theories

'Social change' means the changes in the fundamental institutions, value orientations, and behavioural patterns of a society's social structure within a given time. We can speak of slow or accelerated social change depending on how quickly change occurs in a society's basic institutions – its political, legal, and economic organisation, family structures and domestic partnerships, the educational and training system, etc. The term became a fundamental principle of sociology with the publication of *Social Change* (1922) by the American sociologist William F. Ogburn (1886–1959). Overview of the theories of social change can be found in Dreitzel 1967, Jäger and Meyer 2003, Scheuch 2003a and 2003b, and Zapf 1984.

If one puts aside older philosophical and socio-philosophical theories concerning the transformation of social and political structures, the discussion of the causes and controllability of social change begins with the 'double revolution' (Hobsbawm 1962: 13), when the combined effects of the political revolutions, especially those following the French Revolution of 1789, and the industrial revolution originating in England extensively changed the societies affected by this dynamic. Sociology arose to explain this fundamental change from the traditional to the modern, industrial society. Since Auguste Comte (1798–1857), to whom the term is attributed, all sociological theories are also explicitly or implicitly theories of social change, its causes, and how to react to it.

According to Karl Marx (1818–1883), private ownership of production capital is not only the main cause of exploitation and oppression, but also of unplanned social change. Only by dispossessing the dispossessors can this enduring conflict, which pervades history, come to an end. For Max Weber (1864–1920), capitalism – 'the most fate-deciding power of our time'[1] (Weber 2002: 560) – resulted from long-term rationalisation processes in all realms of existence, whereby the Protestant ethic, especially concerning work and professions, became a main driving force (Weber 2002: 150 et seq.).

A further theory about the long-term causes of social change was set forth by Norbert Elias (1897–1990). Beginning in the high Middle Ages, he studied 'the sociogenesis of Western civilisation'[2], the long-term formation of general behavioural standards, as a basis of civil society (Elias 1997a, 1997b). Ogburn was the first to formulate an explicit sociological theory on the causes and consequences of social change, which, with its central concept of 'cultural lag', remains current. According to Ogburn, a *cultural lag* emerges whenever there are two cultural elements in a reciprocal relationship with each other and one changes earlier or more strongly than the other, thereby disrupting the balance which formerly existed between them (Ogburn: 1967: 328). Further, the main cause of social change is the advance of knowledge in the natural and engineering sciences and their implementation in technological innovation (Ogburn 1967). At their core, these theories are similar to those of Karl Marx on the relationship of the material base (the productive forces) to the superstructure of law and politics, morality, and culture.

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[1]   „die schicksalsvollste Macht unserer Zeit"
[2]   „die Soziogenese der abendländischen Zivilisation"

2   Trends in social mobilisation and modernisation

The effects of the double revolution captured one country and continent after the other. Daniel Lerner assumed 'that the Western model of modernisation features certain components and sequences that are universally relevant. For example, urbanisation has reduced illiteracy everywhere, whereby the use of mass media increased. In parallel to this, there is increased economic participation (increase of per capita income) and increased political involvement through the expansion of voting rights'[3] (Lerner 1984: 364 et seq.).

The social mobilisation and modernisation of the lifestyle that begin with the double revolution can be summarised by the following trends:

• Secularisation of the ruling and ownership structure and of the conditions of existence

• Emancipation; the demand for freedom and equality

• Capitalisation of property and ownership structures

• Rationalisation and scientification of the foundations of existence

• Juridification and an increase in the level of participation

• The insurance of risks to health and life both privately and through the social state

• ▷ *Urbanisation* and improvement of the standard of living, connected with a constant expansion of mobility and communication on a municipal and regional as well as a national and global level

3   Social change under digitalisation and globalisation

Around 1970, a new level of industrial and technological development began with the digital revolution. It led (and continues to lead) to an acceleration of change in all areas of work and life, at a speed that would previously have been considered inconceivable. This is based on new information and communication systems, the computer, and the internet. Digital networks (▷ *Social and organisational networks*) can expand the previous limits of communication and information into seemingly boundless dimensions. Through the digital control of production processes, global time differences can be exploited, which leads to the relocation of production sites and to new industrial regions. The Spanish-American sociologist Manuel Castells was one of the first to record the value of the new information and production technologies for individuals and society and outline the contours of the emerging 'network society' (Castells 2004). The digital revolution also accelerates the processes of ▷ *Globalisation*. Its dimensions and effects on individuals and society in earlier epochs, especially since the beginning of the colonial era in the 15th century, have generally been undervalued (cf. Osterhammel/Petersson 2007). Although the financial sector became ever more dominant through colonisation, the digitalisation of capital

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3   „daß das westliche Modell der Modernisierung gewisse Komponenten und Sequenzen aufweist, die universell relevant sind. Überall hat z. B. die Urbanisierung das Analphabetentum vermindert; dadurch nahm die Benutzung der Massenmedien zu. Parallel dazu kommt es zu einer erhöhten wirtschaftlichen Teilhabe (Steigerung des Pro-Kopf-Einkommens) und zu einer Erhöhung der politischen Teilhabe durch die Ausdehnung des Wahlrechts"

transfer has impacted individual nations and currency systems in ways that are increasingly less calculable and politically controllable, but can be perceived as an anonymous power by every individual. Some of the aforementioned trends of social change directly impact the changes in the patterns of using space. Any forward-looking regional planning must consider those trends, and many others, especially demographic change (which is being done through the spatial planning reports at the federal, state, and regional levels).

4   Non-technological sources of social change

Despite all the changes through the digital revolution, it must be remembered that there is no clear or straight-line connection between technological innovation and social change. Differences in value orientations, which are reflected differently in the various aspects of society, play a major role in this regard. This applies not only to countries, where totally different religious and cultural foundations coincide with the most modern technology, but also to Germany (cf. Geißler 2014; Schäfers 2012). New values and attitudes have a considerable influence on social change, such as gender (▷ *Gender in spatial sciences and planning*), the aging of society (▷ *Demographic change*), processes of ▷ *Migration* and integration, new family structures and domestic partnerships, new attitudes about the environment, inclusion, and educational processes, etc.

The sources of social change and the changes in ▷ *Lifestyles* are thus both exogenous and endogenous, and usually a combination of both. It is difficult to predict how these factors will impact different aspects of society. In some points, Ogburn's theory of cultural lag remains valid. Law, for example, finds itself in a cultural lag relative to the rapid developments in the digital world. This is connected to the problem of how the impacts of information technologies and the global finance sector can be brought into a new legal, social and democratic order for individuals and society (Lanier 2014).

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