



THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Introduction:

Social change is such a prevalent and often disturbing feature of contemporary life that one may be tempted to suppose that it is peculiarly modern. Social change is the significant alteration of social structures i.e. the patterns of social action and interaction including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct) values, cultural products and symbols. In our society changes are bound to come. In some societies these changes are very slow while in others changes are rapid and fast. But no society can escape from changes. It is therefore required to take these changes into consideration for proper study of society.

Meaning

The word “change” denotes a difference in anything observed over some period of time. Social change, therefore, would mean observable differences in any social phenomena over any period of time.

Definitions

Jones. “Social change is a term used to describe variations in, or modifications of, any aspect of social processes, social patterns, social interaction or social organisation.”

Mazumdar, H. T. “Social change may be defined as a new fashion or mode, either modifying or replacing the old, in the life of a people, or in the operation of a society.”

Theories of Social Change

1. Theory of Deterioration
2. Cyclic Theory
3. Linear Theory
4. Auguste Comte's Theory
5. Herbert Spencer's Theory

Karl Marx's Theory of Social Change

Veblen's Theory of Social Change

Theory of Deterioration

Some thinkers have identified social change with deterioration. According to them, man originally lived in a perfect state of happiness in a golden age. Subsequently, however, deterioration began to take place with the result that man reached an age of comparative degeneration. This was the notion in the ancient Orient. It was expressed in the epic poems of India, Persia and Sumeria. Thus, according to Indian mythology man has passed through four ages—Satyug, Treta, Dwapar and Kaliyug. The Satyug was the best age in which man was honest, truthful and perfectly happy. Thereafter degeneration began to take place. The modern age is the age of Kaliyug wherein man is deceitful, treacherous, false, dishonest, selfish and consequently unhappy. That such should be the concept of history in early times is understandable, since we observe deterioration in every walk of life today.

Cyclic Theory

Another ancient notion of social change found side by side with the afore-mentioned one, is that human society goes through certain cycles. Looking to the cyclic changes of days and nights and of climates some sociologists like Spengler believe that society has a predetermined life cycle and has birth, growth, maturity, and decline. Modern society is in the last stage. It is in its old age. But since history repeats itself, society after passing through all the stages, returns to the original stage, whence the cycle again begins. This concept is found in Hindu mythology, according to which Satyug will again start after Kaliyug is over. J.B. Bury in his *The Idea of Progress*, pointed out that this concept is also found in the teachings of stoic philosophers of Greece as well as in those of some of the Roman philosophers, particularly Marcus Aurelius.

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The view that change takes place in a cyclical way has been accepted by some modern thinkers also who have given different versions of the cyclical theory. The French anthropologist and biologist Vacher de Lapouge held that race is the most important determinant of culture. Civilization, he maintained, develops and progresses when a society is composed of individuals belonging to superior races and declines when racially inferior people are absorbed into it.

Western civilization, according to him, is doomed to extinction because of the constant infiltration of foreign inferior elements and their increasing control over it. The German anthropologist Otto Ammon, the Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain and American Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard also agreed with the view of Lapouge which may be called the theory of biological cycle.

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Spengler developed another version of cyclical theory of social change. He analysed the history of various civilizations including the Egyptian, Greek and Roman and concluded that all civilizations pass through a similar cycle of birth, maturity and death. The western civilization is now on its decline which is unavoidable.

In a word, ideational culture is god-ridden. In the idealistic type of culture, reality and value are regarded sensory as well as supersensory. This is a synthesis of ideational and the sensate. The thought and behaviour of man are partly anchored in the materialistic and are partly anchored with the other world.

Linear Theory

Some thinkers subscribe to the linear theory of social change. According to them, society gradually moves to an even higher state of civilization and that it advances in a linear fashion and in the direction of improvement. Auguste Comte postulated three stages of social change: the Theological, the Metaphysical and the Positive. Man has passed through the first two stages, even though in some aspects of life they still prevail, and is gradually reaching the Positive stage. In the first stage man believed that supernatural powers controlled and designed the world. He advanced gradually from belief in fetishes and deities to monotheism.

This stage gave way to the Metaphysical stage, during which man tries to explain phenomena by resorting to abstractions. On the positive stage man considers the search for ultimate causes hopeless and seeks the explanatory facts that can be empirically observed. This implies progress which according to Comte will be assured if man adopts a positive attitude in the understanding of natural and social phenomena.

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Herbert Spencer, who likened society to an organism, maintained that human society has been gradually progressing towards a better state. In its primitive state, the state of militarism, society was characterized by warring groups, by a merciless struggle for existence. From militarism society moved towards a state of industrialism. Society in the stage of industrialism is marked by greater differentiation and integration of its parts. The establishment of an integrated system makes it possible for the different groups—social, economic and racial, to live in peace.



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Some Russian sociologists also subscribed to the linear theory of social change. Nikolai K. Mikhailovsky opined that human society passes through three stages; (1) the objective anthropocentric, (2) the eccentric, and (3) the subjective anthropocentric. In the first stage, man considers himself the centre of the universe and is preoccupied with mystic beliefs in the supernatural. In the second stage, man is given over to abstractions; the abstract is more “real” to him than the actual. In the third stage, man comes to rely upon empirical knowledge by means of which he exercises more and more control over nature for his own benefit. Solo-view conceived of the three stages as the tribal, the national governmental, and the period of universal brotherhood.

Auguste Comte's Theory

Comte said that society has passed through three stages namely theological, metaphysical and positive. In the theological stage society, they believed in supernatural powers and accepted the idea that these powers controlled our social behaviour. During the second stage i.e. the metaphysical stage his ideas about supernatural powers changes and from god he came to abstraction and tried to explain social behavior through abstraction. In the third stage which is called positive stage, everything is being empirically studied and all this is going on in a cyclical order.

Herbert Spencer's Theory

Herbert Spencer linked his theory of social change with organism. According to him a society was initially a militant society which necessitated struggle for existence. Each one struggled to exist. This militant society then passed to industrialism in which there is differentiation and then comes to the next stage in which we pass from differentiation to integration.

Karl Marx's Theory of Social Change

Karl Marx's theory of social change is also called deterministic or single factor theory of social change. According to this theory there is only one factor and not many factors are responsible for bringing social change. According to Karl Marx, economic factor is the only factor responsible for bringing social change. Marx believed that except economic factor all other factors are useless and superfluous and sometimes even harmful. He also believed that religion was the opium of the people and it distracted masses from hard realities of life. For Marx, all ideas change with economic ideas and so also the living standard of the people.

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Not only this but for Marx, social changes which are being witnessed in the society are nothing but due to continuous class struggle. A class struggle is always going on between the rich and the poor, between the employer and the employee, between the exploiter and the exploited and between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. In his own words, history of hitherto existing struggle is of only class struggle. He was sure that each economic change brought along a social change as well.

Veblen's Theory of Social Change

Veblen has given his own theory which is again a deterministic theory. In this theory stress has been laid on one factor namely habit. In his opinion, way of habit is a way of thought. According to him environment plays a far reaching role in bringing about social change. Our social and economic structure is directly influenced by our environment. According to him “habit and environments embody themselves in institutions which in the course of time intervene between the material exigencies of life and speculative scheme of things.”