

# Continuity/Change

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How do societies change? Is there a set of principles which govern processes of change in different societies? Do changes in society *make sense*? Sociologists are continually setting themselves problems about social change – most of them not as abstract as these. When we examine the reorganization of family life, or analyse the role of women in the workforce, we are asking a set of questions about (amongst other things) social change. When we consider styles in fashion, or in cinema or in music, we are considering processes of social change. When we think about our object of study as *modern* society, or when we consider *traditional* institutions such as the Church or the monarchy, we are employing an implicit set of categories based on conceptions of social change and continuity.

This chapter considers different approaches within sociology to questions of continuity and change. The discussion is in three sections. It begins by looking at how the emergence of sociology as a discipline was closely tied to the recognition of a distinctly 'modern' society, one which was marked off from traditional forms of social life and was itself characterized by rapid and endemic processes of social change. Different theorists analysed the special character of modern society on the basis of certain axial principles – the key factors, that is, that shaped modern social forms.

Sociologists have developed a number of formal systems within which processes of change and mechanisms of continuity might be understood. The central part of this discussion identifies four broad 'models' for analysing change. Three of these – evolutionary approaches, functionalist approaches and conflict approaches – represent accounts which have been most influential within sociology. The fourth model – non-linear approaches –

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indicates a more recent challenge to conventional methods of understanding social change, history and transition. This alternative way of viewing continuity and change poses a new set of problems for social analysis (Abrams 1982).

The final part of the discussion returns to the character of continuity/change as an organizing dichotomy for sociological thought, and places this in the context of contemporary concerns and critiques. While classical theorists identified different precepts for the analysis of modern society, they shared a commitment to an idea of social progress. Descriptive accounts of social change were in this way set within an overarching narrative of progress in modern societies. This central notion has been seriously questioned within recent social theory.

While the validity of large-scale models of transition has been widely challenged, recent social analysis evinces a new concern with change in late modern societies. In particular, theories of post-Fordism and postmodernism have identified pronounced shifts in the spheres of economics and culture. Given the effects of globalization in each of these domains, it is unlikely that such changes will be confined to the societies of the capitalist 'core'. This presents contemporary sociology with something of a paradox. On the one hand, recent critical arguments have put into question sociology's attempt to impose analytic order on a rather disorganized social world. On the other, processes of change in an increasingly global society appear ever faster, more far-reaching, and more in need of analysis. It is in terms of such a paradox that the problem of continuity and change must now be placed (Giddens 1984).

## SOCIOLOGY AND MODERN SOCIETY

The analysis of how and why societies change is one of the most basic and the most difficult concerns for sociology. As a discipline, classical sociology set itself the task of explaining the emergent form of modern society. Thinkers such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber sought in different ways to capture the specific character of the **modern**, and suggested how this might be distinguished from **traditional** ways of life. Our 'myths of origins' for modern society frequently involve seismic shifts in the organization of social life: the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the 'great transformation' from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe. The fact that the latter two of these involved rather slow, incremental and patchy processes of change may immediately suggest some of the difficulties in analysing social change over a long period and on a large scale.

Many of the key categories which have informed sociological analysis – industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, technological innovation – centre on processes through which forms of social life come to be

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modernized. A twin concern with social *change* – the processes through which social forms are transformed – and *continuity* – the processes which maintain and reproduce a stable social system – has been an important feature of sociological analysis since Comte. Comte conceived of these dual processes in terms of laws governing social *dynamics* (producing change) and laws governing social *statics* (maintaining stability).

If classical sociology evinced a fascination with the rapid social changes brought about by industrialization and technical innovation, this was matched by a concern with social stability and order. Moreover, theories of change implied an interest in the future of societies, as well as in the relationship between past and present. The concept of **progress**, in particular, involved the projection of changes into the future, and was often linked to attempts to regulate and stabilize social change in this regard. This entailed a special role for the social sciences. If modern society was characterized by rapid and widespread changes, rational social science promised to render these observable, comprehensible and controllable. Social change, that is, might be harnessed in the interests of social improvement.

Such a concern with processes of social change and continuity has both descriptive elements, and logical or formal elements. In descriptive mode, sociologists provide practical accounts of the processes and effects of change in society. In formal mode, sociologists identify the structural properties or characteristics which work either to promote change in social forms, or to preserve their stability. A descriptive analysis of particular social changes, then, frequently draws on a more formal understanding of why societies do, or indeed do not, change. For this reason, the way in which we conceive processes and mechanisms of social change will be closely tied to how we conceptualize the formation of society and social structures.

Classical approaches to social change shared two general principles. The first of these related to the *scale* on which change occurred; the second concerned the *direction* of social change. Each was based on a particular conception of society, and a particular view of history. Nineteenth-century social theory conceived of society as a complex whole – a unitary, structured form. Thinkers such as Marx and Durkheim sought to identify the enduring and distinctive structures and institutions around which dynamics of change and stability might be modelled: in Marx's case, the mode of production; in Durkheim's, the division of labour. While different theorists focused on different elements as the catalysts for change or the mechanisms of social order, the assumption that change and continuity obtained at the level of a social *system* was generally shared. This assumption led sociologists to look for regular patterns of change in different societies, as well as laying the ground for large-scale comparative analysis.

The second conception shared among theorists of social change concerns the direction in which change takes place. A conviction that processes of change tend towards the improvement of the conditions of social life and the refinement of social forms is based on two major influences in the

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development of sociology. The first of these is an Enlightenment philosophy of history, particularly evident in the work of Comte. In this view, the present is located within a linear movement of history towards a future which is 'perfectible'. Human society, that is, is getting better all the time. This tradition of Enlightenment thought sees the development of human knowledge and the application of reason to human affairs as the basis for social progress.

The other influence derives from the impact of Darwinism on nineteenth-century social theory, offering an account of how social systems 'evolve' in terms of increasing complexity, differentiation and adaptation. These conjoined influences – theories of progress and evolutionism – were most apparent in the work of such classical thinkers as Spencer and Durkheim. While other approaches to social change and reproduction, particularly those influenced by Marxism and centring on issues of conflict and crisis, tend to reject an evolutionary and incremental model of social transformation, they nevertheless tend to rely on a linear conception of the direction of social change. Societies are seen to move *forward* through the development of instrumental capacities, social institutions and enlightened social values. Classical sociology in these ways placed dynamics of change and reproduction in modern societies at the centre of its analytic agenda. It also established a framework for analysis based on a large-scale or 'macroscopic' perspective, and an orientation to linear, progressive change. These core elements provide the backdrop against which we might examine different models for the analysis of continuity and change.

### MODELS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

For the purpose of this discussion, I have grouped approaches to social change and continuity within four broad categories. These categories are rather artificial, and are not mutually exclusive. I use them here as 'sorting' devices for a range of ideas about social transition and stability. The four categories are:

- 1 evolutionary approaches;
- 2 functionalist approaches;
- 3 conflict and agency approaches;
- 4 non-linear approaches.

#### ***Evolutionary approaches to social change***

The most influential account of social change within classical sociology was one modelled on the natural scientific theory of **evolution**. Within this perspective, society is viewed as a complex totality whose parts are subject

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to a process of increasing differentiation, adaptation and specialization. Such an approach was an explicit response to the emergence of new social forms under industrial capitalism in Western Europe and North America. The two key processes involved in social change in this account are growth and integration. As a society 'grows' in population size and concentration, economic output and technical competence, different parts of the system become more highly specialized in terms of their function. Crucially, for evolutionary social theory, it is precisely this process of differentiation which integrates modern societies. As different functions, for example those relating to production and those relating to government, become more specialized, society is constituted as a system of interdependent parts, each fulfilling its necessary role.

For theorists of social evolution, increasing complexity at the level of social systems represents a logic of progress in human societies, in a manner which is analogous to the way that successful biological species adapt to changing conditions. Theorists such as Spencer, Durkheim and Hobhouse offered linear models of change marked by increasing adaptability and differentiation within social forms. For Durkheim, the complexity of modern society is based on an advanced division of labour, where work is broken down into a multiplicity of different activities, and individuals come to play quite distinct roles within the system of production.

In his account in *The Division of Labour in Society* Durkheim (1964a) argued that individual roles were becoming more highly differentiated as an outcome of social and economic development. Modern society was characterized by an increased 'moral density', where the social interactions of its members become more numerous, more frequent and more specialized. Such moral density promotes, for Durkheim, a form of 'organic solidarity' which holds society together as a complex totality. This is in distinction to the 'mechanical solidarity' typical of premodern societies, whose members are integrated in terms of very set social roles and a more basic structure of authority.

While these models are rather rudimentary, Durkheim did not see this transition in social forms simply as a 'great transformation' from traditional to modern society. Rather, the development of industrial society involved an ongoing process of differentiation, which at an extreme threatened to isolate individuals and dissolve the social bonds between them. At this point, social science had a role to play in suggesting mechanisms through which these processes could be controlled. Durkheim saw the advanced division of labour as creating a more complex network of social interdependencies, but he also identified the associated dangers of anomie, individualism and disorder which needed to be regulated by positive social policy reforms. Processes of change and differentiation in modern social forms, that is, needed to be managed in the interest of preserving social stability.

Although an evolutionist notion of social progress has been something of a guiding spirit for the development of theories of change, evolutionary

models themselves have come to be held in disfavour. Two important strands of criticism have been levelled at evolutionary approaches to social change: the first is a political critique, and the second an analytic critique. Firstly, the idea that a more complex society is necessarily a more 'advanced' society, and the conflation of models of social and human evolution, establishes sometimes quite explicit hierarchies between different societies and social groups. 'Advanced' societies may be distinguished from 'backward' societies both in social structural terms and in cultural terms. Not least of the criticisms which may be levelled at social evolutionary principles is their use to legitimate certain racist and nationalist claims to superiority.

Aside from the pernicious political purposes which social evolutionism has at times served, at an analytic level evolutionary models have been challenged on the basis of their intrinsic theory of social forms. Evolutionary models posit a unified social totality: society, that is, is understood as a distinct and coherent entity. While society is seen as increasingly complex and highly differentiated, different levels of social reality are abstracted in the form of a unitary *system*. Evolutionary approaches are in this way committed to a large-scale or macroscopic view of changes within a social system, which cannot always account for changes at a more local level. The idea that societies advance via a smooth, linear logic of progress depends on taking a rather long view of social change. Taking a 'multi-linear' approach, on the other hand, highlights the uneven and often unequal manner in which change may occur, and puts into question a larger notion of 'progress'. We might consider this point in relation to different perspectives on industrialization. The conflation of modernity with progress, for example, tends to obscure the fact that there is no necessary link between the modernization of economic structures and the improvement of political systems or basic living conditions in many developing societies.

A macroscopic perspective may also miss the way that the effects of progress are not usually distributed or experienced equally within a social system. A feminist analysis of industrialization, for instance, would argue that women's labour was not decoupled from the household in the same manner, or at the same rate, as men's labour. And an emphasis on technological innovations, such as the spinning jenny or the lathe (or, indeed, the personal computer), reveals the 'lag' between changes in material culture and larger changes in social and cultural organization. Each of these perspectives challenges the even, linear account offered by evolutionary approaches to social change.

### **Functionalist approaches to social change**

Evolutionary approaches, while they have been subject to serious criticism, have exerted a profound influence on the analysis of society and social

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change. The conception of society as a complex totality is perhaps the most important principle of sociological analysis which may be traced back to an evolutionist perspective, together with the latter's emphasis on linear social progress. A major offshoot of evolutionist theory in this century is represented by the functionalist account of social change.

Functionalist models of social change draw on a metaphorical comparison between social systems and biological organisms. The existence of a whole organism or system may be explained in terms of the relationship between its different organs or parts. Functionalism, that is, concerns the interrelationship between parts and wholes. Functionalism is not always demarcated from evolutionism, but may be distinguished in terms of its preoccupation with mechanisms of social order rather than logics of social change. While Spencer and Durkheim are seen as the classical forebears of functionalist thought, within twentieth-century sociology functionalism is most closely associated with the work of Talcott Parsons (Parsons 1966). Cybernetic and 'chaos' theories, which view social forms as complex, self-regulating systems, provide the most contemporary version of a functionalist social analysis.

In functionalist accounts, society is viewed as a self-equilibrating system, displaying an internal tendency towards social stability or balance. Parsons divides this system into distinct but interdependent structures or subsystems, each fulfilling a different role in the reproduction of social order: those geared to adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency (the AGIL model). We might broadly, but usefully, think about these different subsystems as corresponding to the economy, the political system, social institutions and culture. Modern societies are in this way assumed to be constituted in similar ways, and to share a structural tendency towards equilibrium.

In a complex society, these subsystems are highly differentiated one from another, in terms of both the social functions they perform and the clarity of the boundaries between them. In modern societies, for example, the economic system is more clearly separated from the family than is generally taken to be the case in traditional societies (although this claim would be challenged by many feminist thinkers). Similarly, rational, technocratic government is rigorously demarcated from the realm of cultural values. For example, the government of a nuclear state may make a decision to conduct nuclear tests explicitly on technical and scientific grounds, setting aside ethical questions about the possession of such weapons.

Parsons distinguishes between processes which preserve and reproduce a stable social system, and those which transform social structures. Functionalist analysis has a special concern with those processes which maintain **equilibrium**, or *homeostasis*, within a social system. These processes involve the adaptation of particular subsystems to changing conditions, and the maintenance of distinct boundaries between them. Parsons suggests that homeostatic processes allow a social system to adapt to external changes

(which might include interaction with other societies, or a changing economic environment) without radical social upheaval.

An example of the way in which particular subsystems adapt in a functional manner to change at another structural level is evident in Parsons's account of the nuclear family. Parsons argues that the small, loosely integrated unit is the typical family form in modern, industrial societies. This change in the social institution of the family is in line with two sets of conditions relating to the economic sphere. Firstly, within an industrial division of labour, production shifts away from the household as the basic economic unit. The space of the family and the space of work are separated. Secondly, economic roles and status increasingly come to be acquired through training, qualification and work experience, rather than being passed on through family structures. The individual gains greater economic independence from the extended family, and as a result extended familial bonds weaken.

As well as being an example of functional adaptation between different social structures (economic forms and the social institution of the family), Parsons's treatment of the family offers a linear model of social change – where economic modernization corresponds to more 'modern' social institutions. However this model, based on a study of North American society, may be challenged using comparative data. Ethnographic and historical accounts may be used to argue that the 'modern' conjugal family form was equally common in pre-industrial societies, both in East Asia and in Europe (see Chirot 1994: 126–7). While it may be true that the nuclear family form is well suited to the division of labour in an industrial economy, this does not simply indicate a logic of social progress.

Functionalist accounts may be criticized on four important levels. Firstly, they conceive of society as a bounded system. Societies are not organisms and do not have natural 'boundaries'. The use of a biological metaphor neglects the differences and fragmentation which occur *within* social groups, such as class and power relations, as well as patterns of interaction and exchange between societies. The second line of criticism targets the conservative nature of functionalist explanation. Functionalist analysis is chiefly concerned with processes which secure social continuity and equilibrium. On these grounds, it is unable to provide an adequate explanation for social change. What is more, by defining society in terms of homeostasis or equilibrium, functionalist approaches tend to preclude the possibility of radical change altogether.

Functionalism has been criticized, thirdly, for its relationship to a crude form of social evolutionism. In this connection we might refer to Parsons and Smelser's (1956) distinction between the characteristic structural formation, or 'pattern variables', of industrial and pre-industrial societies. The evolutionary impulse within many functionalist accounts has been well suited to a view of non-Western culture as premodern, pre-literate or pre-scientific. Fourthly, functionalism provides an 'over-determined' model of

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the individual, endowing them with minimal agency within a complex but ultimately self-regulating social system. It is this conception of agency, together with the functionalist emphasis on continuity rather than change, that is challenged by conflict theories.

### **Conflict and agency approaches to social change**

The most vigorous challenge to functionalist accounts has come from conflict theories. This dynamic approach to change stresses social disorder and crisis, in contrast to functionalism's concern with order and balance. It also stresses the importance of social agents in bringing about change. Conflict models have been closely associated with Marxist analysis. Marx's own work was infected by a nineteenth-century conception of progress which he shared with the social evolutionists, and Marxist history is generally linear in orientation. However, Marx's account of systemic contradiction and revolutionary transformation marks his work off clearly from other nineteenth-century thinkers who viewed change as smooth, naturalized and cumulative. Later Marxists developed a notion of 'uneven development' to explain how societal transition did not occur at the same time, at the same rate, or to the same extent in different national and regional contexts.

A further strand of Marxist theory draws on Marx's concept of class struggle as the basis for social change. This recalls Marx and Engels's statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.' While conflict is embedded in the economic structure of class, it is realized in the practice of real social agents. Conflict theory has taken up this dynamic conception of social change, albeit in a context where Marx's own model of history and class conflict has been widely questioned.

An important intervention in these debates was signalled by Ralf Dahrendorf's *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959). Dahrendorf argued that Marx's model of class antagonism was no longer adequate for the analysis of modern industrial society. However, he retained the key concepts of class and conflict to analyse the more complex economic and social relations typical of advanced capitalism. Dahrendorf's work represented a critique of the conservative nature of functionalist analysis, as well as its tendency to locate change at the level of social structures rather than that of social actors.

Approaches to change which stress the role of human agency are not confined to class analyses. Indeed, liberal social theory places the rational individual actor at the centre of social processes, whether these involve change and transformation or the upholding of tradition and order. Other accounts of change stress collective action which is not reducible to class. The respective struggles of women, black women and men, and colonized

peoples provide alternative models of resistance and change. Theories of 'new social movements' have developed since the 1960s in order to analyse such collective agents as peace, environmental and gay rights movements. These draw at least as much from feminist and civil rights models as they do from class theory. The widely celebrated role of 'people power' in the collapse of Soviet communism, however partial an explanation, provides a clear example of the importance of human agents in effecting social change.

These alternative models of agency depart from a class-based approach not simply in identifying a different set of actors, but also on a more fundamental level. Marxist analysis remains wedded to an overall logic of change, located in the economic structure of class. However, theories of new social movements, of popular struggle and especially 'people power', are less firmly grounded in a general explanation of how and why societies change. If the working class, or (less often) women or black people, have been seen as the agents of a historical process which is in some sense overdetermined, social movements which form and reform around single issues, shared lifestyles or social networks put into question this larger logic of social change.

### **Non-linear approaches to social change**

Evolutionary, functionalist and conflict theories bring important differences in emphasis and analysis to the study of social continuity and change. Evolutionary theories focus on a smooth and cumulative model of progress; functionalism emphasizes the processes which maintain social order and adaptation between parts; conflict theories stress the dynamic and disruptive character of social change, including the role of social actors. What these approaches share, however, is a linearity in the *direction* of change. In each case, processes of social change and mechanisms of social order are located within a general logic of progress.

The fourth category under which we might consider theories of continuity and change – that of non-linear approaches – is a particularly diffuse and disparate grouping. These approaches are defined more clearly in terms of their resistance to a logic of social progress than on the basis of a common theory of change. They may also be more useful for explaining apparent 'reversals' or 'declines' as aspects of social change.

These types of explanation construct models alternative to those based on a linear conception of progress. Cyclical and 'rise-and-fall' theories, for instance, offer a different way of describing the patterns in which change occurs. Such models have been most widely used to explain economic cycles or 'waves' – as in the Great Depression, or the boom–bust cycle of successive periods of growth and recession since the Second World War. While these models allow a sharper analytic focus on distinct cycles in economic development, they do not in themselves disrupt a larger logic of

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progress in capitalist societies. However, it may be possible that other cyclical approaches to social change are becoming more relevant and more useful for contemporary sociological analysis in ways which put into question the long-held association between change, modernity and progress.

Notions of 'progress' have been seriously challenged on both conceptual and political grounds, and these criticisms appear to gain increasing support from a range of social and cultural changes in contemporary life. To take a large-scale example, the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union has been followed by a process of what is frequently called nationalist or ethnic 'revival' – a *return*, that is, to what are construed as traditional or premodern customs, affiliations, languages and practices. On a similarly large scale, religious revival may be seen as a global phenomenon, not only in terms of the growth of fundamentalist groups within the major world religions, but also with the proliferation of diverse sects and alternative forms of spiritualism.

These non-linear approaches to social change operate on different scales and in a number of social domains. Aspects of the environmental movement are associated with a return to premodern values which suppose a more holistic relationship between people and nature than that typical of technical, scientific and rational modern society. In the 1980s, the British government encouraged a return to a system of 'Victorian values' which would place greater emphasis on family life, personal industry, charity and civic principles than was thought to be evident in the late twentieth century. The recent 'backlash' against feminist ideas and programmes in a number of Anglophone societies involves a critique of 'progressive' views of gender roles and relationships.

This is not to suggest, in any of these cases, that the traditional values and practices which are being 'revived' are necessarily more authentic or more socially desirable than the effects of 'progress' which they displace. Indeed, the notion of tradition does not simply indicate a self-evident realm of values, attitudes and behaviour, but emerges in response to a particular representation of the ways that society has changed. However, each of these examples puts into question our attitudes to the present, our relationship to the past, and our ways of imagining the future. The language and the categories of analysis which we use to understand and explain our social experiences are challenged.

This observation raises a further issue about the manner in which change is conceived and represented within social theory. Do non-linear approaches suggest that the nature of change itself has altered, or is it the case that change in society will appear differently depending on how it is filtered through particular analytic models? The primary mode of explanation within sociological accounts of change has been concerned with questions of causality, seeking to identify the conditions or factors which produce processes of change. A logic of cause and effect, however, is put into question by a non-linear approach to social change.

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An emphasis on the 'discontinuity' of social change is particularly associated with the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (Foucault 1984). While Foucault had an interest in the differential character of historical periods – the ancient, the classical and especially the modern – his concern was not to locate these as phases in an overarching logic of social progress and transformation. Rather, these might be seen as historical moments which evinced particular constellations of ideas, practices, institutions, and what Foucault called 'discourses' – the formal systems of knowledge which help to organize different domains of social life. Foucault's analyses, which have gained increasing influence within sociology in recent years, concentrated on such domains as medicine, psychiatry, deviance and punishment, and sexuality. In each of these cases, Foucault examined the local processes, structures and ideas which formed and transformed these domains within the early modern period.

This approach issues a serious challenge to the notion of historical explanation in social science. Foucault's work does not simply offer a local analysis of social changes which may be inserted into an overall systemic logic. Rather, he rejects the emphasis on large theoretical systems, and stresses instead the irreducible character of distinct patterns of disruption and change. For example, while Foucault suggests that nineteenth-century transformations in the regulation of people's bodies (in relation to such things as their health, their hygiene and their sexual conduct) helped to produce a sober and industrious workforce, he is opposed to the idea that these social changes may be explained as effects of capitalist development. In rejecting the relevance of causal explanation for his own form of analysis, Foucault subverts the central mode of explanation in the social sciences: that which seeks to establish a relation between social causes and effects.

In this approach, change might be thought of in terms of *discontinuity*: disruptions and alterations in social organization which are not easily reduced to an underlying causal logic. Social change, in this conception, is seen as arbitrary, accidental or unpredictable. What, then, might be the implications for a contemporary sociological account of continuity and change? (Crook et al. 1992).

### CONCLUSION: A 'FUTURE' FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

The challenge to linear conceptions of social change fits in with a more general critique of the idea of progress (Hall and Gieben 1992). To a significant degree, theories of social change have been developed within sociology in relation to processes of modernization, and have taken the characteristic features of modernization as the central elements of their models. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, the social effects of industrialization and urbanization, and the systemic upheavals associated

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with periods of revolution have been centrepieces of analysis of social change.

This concern with logics of continuity and change has served to reinforce certain assumptions that have helped shape sociology as a discipline. If modern society was characterized by the classical sociologists in terms of rapid, complex and radical change, its implicit 'other' was a premodern society which was understood to be fixed, simple and unchanging. This distinction served to underpin discourses of 'backwardness' in relation to non-Western societies and to promote Western models of industrial development. It also produced a particular account of modern society which did not always recognize the coexistence of 'traditional' and 'modern' elements, or the manner in which change may occur in quite unpredictable and even regressive ways.

An interest in processes of social change has, arguably, gone into something of its own decline within contemporary sociology. This is clearly not because social change no longer takes place (although theories about the 'end of history' have enjoyed a certain vogue of late), but because sociologists have become subject to a kind of scepticism about their ability to analyse large-scale processes of change. The construction of 'grand' theoretical models for explaining social change (such as that offered by Marxist historical materialism) is generally not considered viable as an analytic tool, being too abstract, too unwieldy, too insensitive to the richness of social detail, too arrogant in the assumption of its own explanatory power. The 'order' which is established by the use of such theoretical constructs is seen to derive from the model itself, rather than accurately representing any underlying pattern of social progress. Such analytic models, that is, impose order on a world which might be better understood in terms of disorder, disjuncture and accident; and which is in any case irreducible to a single axial principle, such as the system of production.

Is there, then, a 'future' for theories of change? Problematics of continuity and change continue to preoccupy sociological analysis. Is consumer capitalism fundamentally different from industrial capitalism? Are we, or are some of us, now living in a postmodern age? Is the nation-state still relevant? How is new technology reshaping social forms?

These questions are large ones, but if a set of principles were to be established for how they might be studied, perhaps most importantly this would involve a sensitivity to questions of *scale*. An interest in the local effects of social change, in the diverse connections between different factors, places and agents, offers a descriptive richness which can be missed by broad-brush theories of change.

The other principle of analysis which may have to be reconsidered concerns the *direction* of change. A more developed focus on the cycles, rhythms and contingencies of social change departs from a universal logic of progress. This would avoid a tendency to see local continuities in terms of social stasis or inertia, of conservatism or 'backwardness'. Other factors

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which did not appear to fit a linear model, such as religious revival in secularized societies, would not appear as aberrations or historical hangovers within a larger pattern of forward movement. Questions of scale and of direction, therefore, remain central to sociological accounts of change. However, criticisms of large-scale attempts to analyse social transitions suggest that each of these principles should be approached in a quite flexible manner. Patterns of change tend to look the same only when viewed from a great height; more particular and contextual analysis stresses the distinctive and irreducible character of social events, processes and actors. Social change is still a key concern for sociology; it does not, however, always happen in the image of sociological models.

### KEY CONCEPTS

**CONTINUITY** The state or quality of things being continuous in society. The idea that we can rely on a certain stasis and stability in the order of things from one day to the next. Our laws, rules, means of communication and forms of understanding depend on this.

**CHANGE** The idea of discontinuity between historical moments. Of course change is happening all of the time in as much as what I do today is not the same as I did yesterday, but some change is more significant and some more lasting than other change e.g. revolution; war; votes for women. Sociologists study the causes and significance of change.

**Modern** This is largely a way of describing societies that have evolved through industrialization, urbanization and capitalism. Apart from these major structural changes we also note a change in the attitudes and beliefs of modern societies.

**Tradition** This is a way of referring to pre-modern societies, the ancient and the feudal. Tradition is also a way of referring to those elements of the past that are important and kept alive in the present. Thus all academic disciplines have traditions otherwise we would only be studying yesterdays findings.

**Progress** The idea that change is for the good. To progress is to move forward positively. A problem with evolutionism is that it confuses growth and progress.

**Evolution** A theory originally developed by Darwin to account for the way that organisms change strategically in order to adapt to changes in their

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environment, those that do not change do not survive. In relation to societies the theory implies that we are all adapting to social change in the same ways. In an earlier stage of social science people believed that 'simple' or 'primitive' societies were evolving towards 'civilization'.

**Equilibrium** The state of affairs where all parts of a system are perfectly balanced and thus ensuring the perfect functioning of that system. Any one sided development or malfunction within a system can cause the system to change, distort or collapse.