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CHAPTER 23 *Social Change*

CHAPTER OUTLINE

"Everything changes," observed the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. It was he who pointed out that a man cannot step twice into the same river—for he is not quite the same man, nor is it quite the same river. This principle applies to every phenomenon known to us, from the behavior of subatomic particles to the expansion of the universe, from the growth and decay of living organisms to changes in individual psychology. Societies, as we are only too well aware in the modern world, also change. We have pointed to these changes throughout this book, placing particular emphasis on the social transformation that accompanies industrialization (see Chapter 4, Society, and Chapter 18, The Economic Order). Yet, although social change is a central concern of sociology, the question of how, why, and in what ways societies change remains one of the most intriguing and difficult problems in the discipline.

Social change is the alteration in patterns of social structure, social institutions, and social behavior over time. No society can successfully resist change, not even those that try to do so, although some societies are more resistant to change than others. But the rate, nature, and direction of change differ greatly from one society to another. In the last two hundred years, the United States has changed from a predominantly agricultural society into a highly urbanized and industrialized one. In the same period, the society of the BaMbuti pygmies of the Central African forests has changed hardly at all. Why? In all but the most inhospitable parts of the world we find the ruins of great civilizations. What caused them to flourish, and what caused them to collapse? Why did civilization arise in India long before it appeared in Europe? Why did industrialism arise in Europe rather than in India? Does social change take

place in a random, haphazard manner, or are recurrent patterns to be found in different societies? Why is change abrupt or far-reaching in some societies but slow or insignificant in others? Are all human societies moving toward a common destiny and similar social forms, or will they differ in the future as much as they have in the past?

These are important questions, and they are as old as sociology itself. The man who first coined the term "sociology," Auguste Comte, believed that the new science could lay bare the processes of social change and thus make it possible to plan the human future in a rational way. Almost without exception, the most distinguished sociologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have grappled with the problem of social change. But it must be confessed that sociology has, so far, failed to fully overcome the challenge of explaining social change. Many theories have been offered, but none has won general acceptance. As Wilbert E. Moore (1960) comments: "The mention of 'theory of social change' will make most social scientists appear defensive, furtive, guilt-ridden, or frightened."

Why does the study of social change present such problems? There are two basic reasons. The first is that the understanding of social change, or *dynamics*, logically involves an understanding of social order and stability, or *statics*. We cannot know precisely why or how societies change until we know precisely why and how they form relatively stable units in the first place (Parsons, 1951; Moore, 1960). We know that societies—which consist of many different individuals and often of many very different groups—tend to "hang together," or to be integrated. But we still have no generally accepted theory of why this should be so—of why a society should not simply disintegrate into its component parts. Again, many theories have been proposed—such as the functional need of people for one another, the political authority of the state, the inborn sociability of our species, or the existence of shared values that "glue" a society together. None of these theories, however, seems to offer a really satisfactory explanation of why societies are generally orderly and stable. Social order and social change are closely linked, and it is unlikely that we can fully understand the latter without a fully developed theory of the former.

The second reason for the difficulty of developing a general theory is that social change involves such complex and varied factors. If any sample of pure water is heated to 100 degrees centigrade at sea level, it will boil. We can identify heat as the cause of the change, and we can predict that the same thing will happen in all similar circumstances in the future. Changes in human societies are not so easily investigated. Each society is unique, and any changes that take place are likely to result from a whole complex of interacting factors—environmental, technological, personal, cultural, political, religious, economic, and so on. To discover the cause or causes of change is therefore very difficult indeed—especially as we cannot "rerun" history or conduct laboratory experiments in large-scale social change to test our theories. And because each society is unique, we must be hesitant about using the experiences of one society as the basis for confident predictions about changes in another.

These problems are not impossible to overcome; they are merely difficult. In principle, we should be able to understand social change. It is a basic assumption of science that all events have causes. If this were not so, the social and physical world would be unintelligible to us. Sociology is still an infant science, dealing with a very complicated subject, but we already have a good, if partial and tentative, understanding of the processes of social change. In this chapter we will consider two major topics: first, some general theories of social change, and second, some specific factors that can cause social changes. Finally, we will review the present state of our understanding and assess the prospects for predicting social change in the future.

Theories of Social Change

A number of general theories of social change have been proposed, not only by sociologists but also by historians and anthropologists, for all three disciplines have a common interest in social change. The various theories may be grouped conveniently into four main categories: evolutionary, cyclical, functional, and conflict theories. The study of these theories, incidentally, gives us an interesting insight into the sociology of knowledge and belief. Each type of theory won acceptance because it fitted so well with popular assumptions that prevailed at the time the theory was offered.

Evolutionary Theories

Evolutionary theories are based on the assumption that societies gradually change from simple beginnings into ever more complex forms. This assumption rests on both cross-cultural and historical evidence. We know from the cross-cultural evidence that there have been and still are many small-scale, simple societies, such as those of hunters and gatherers, horticulturalists, and pastoralists. We know from the historical evidence that many small, simple societies have grown steadily larger, and some of them have been transformed into the huge industrial societies of the modern world. But how is this evidence to be interpreted?

The Early Theorists: Unilinear Evolution

Early sociologists, beginning with Auguste Comte, believed that human societies evolve in a *unilinear* way—that is, in "one line" of development that recurs in every society. These thinkers also made an assumption that was very radical at the time, although it is familiar to us today: that social "change" meant "progress" toward something better. They saw change as positive and beneficial, because the evolutionary process implied that societies would necessarily reach new and higher levels of civilization.

The middle and late nineteenth century was an era of colonial expansion, in which soldiers, missionaries, merchants, and adventurers from European countries penetrated distant lands whose peoples had been almost unknown in Europe. The new science of anthropology arose, dedicated to the study of the exotic, "primitive" peoples whose cultures were described in letters and books by the early colonists. Few of the early anthropologists, however, engaged in actual field work among the peoples they studied. Anthropology was mainly an "armchair" discipline that relied on the reports—often inaccurate and sometimes irresponsibly imaginative—of untrained observers in other parts of the world. Working primarily from this kind of information, a number of early anthropologists argued that there was a universal evolutionary process. They claimed that all societies passed through a number of stages, begining in primitive origins and climaxing in Western civilization. Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, believed that there were three basic stages in the process: savagery, barbarism, and civilization.

Figure 23.1 This nineteenth century painting of America's "manifest destiny" captures some of the ethnocentric but popular beliefs of the time. It was generally accepted that "change" meant "progress," and that progress was inevitable. The westward advance of "civilization" across the American continent was seen as a matter of destiny, and the destruction of the native American cultures was regarded as unavoidable and necessary.

This evolutionary view of social change drew much of its impetus from Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Darwin had shown that all life forms had evolved from distant origins and that the general direction of biological evolution was toward greater complexity. Other writers immediately applied this theory to human society. If human beings had evolved from some primitive state, it followed that at some time in the past they must have been entirely without culture. The cultures of different societies around the world offered glimpses of what culture must have been like at different stages of the evolutionary process. In this view, the most primitive cultures and peoples were the closest to the original state of the human species, while the cultures and peoples of Western societies were the most advanced.

Herbert Spencer, a sociologist, carried this Darwinian analogy to its outmost limits. He argued that society itself constituted an organism, with its different parts playing roles similar to those of the different organs and limbs of an animal. Spencer even applied Darwin's principle of "the survival of the fittest" to human societies. He claimed that Western "races," classes, or societies had survived and evolved because they were better adapted to face the conditions of life. This view, known as *social Darwinism*, won extraordinarily wide acceptance in the late nineteenth century. It survived in both Europe and the United States until World War I, and was used to justify the dominance of whites over nonwhites, of the rich over the poor, and of the powerful over the weak.

Evaluation

It is easy to see why these early evolutionary doctrines were so readily accepted. The discovery of so many "primitive" peoples whose cultures differed so radically from those of Europe and North America posed a difficult question: why were some societies more "advanced" than others? Evolutionary theory provided not only an answer but also a flattering and convenient justification for colonial rule over "lesser peoples." There was little concept of cultural relativity at the time. People judged other cultures purely in terms of their own culture's standards and, not surprisingly, found them inferior. The ethnocentric belief that all human societies were evolving in a unilinear way toward one crowning achievement—Western civilization—provided an ideology that legitimized the political and economic interest of the colonizers. The enforced spread of Western culture was conveniently thought of as "the white man's burden"—the thankless but noble task of bringing "higher" forms of civilization to "inferior" peoples.

Figure 23.2 The evolutionary theorists of the nineteenth century assumed that all societies evolve in the same unilinear manner through a series of "stages," culminating in Western civilization. As the ethnographic evidence from preindustrial societies mounted, however, it became clear that no such sequence of stages exists. These "primitive" people in the southwestern Pacific, for example, are being introduced directly to Western culture, thereby skipping the various "stages" that, according to this evolutionary theory, they should pass through.

One problem with evolutionary theories of this unilinear type is that they described but did not explain social change. They offered no convincing explanation of how or why societies should evolve toward the Western pattern. A second and fatal problem is that they were based on faulty interpretations of the data. Different theorists grouped vastly different cultures into misleading categories so that they would fit into the various "stages" of evolution. The trends in Western civilization were ethnocentrically equated with "progress," largely because only one aspect of change—technological and economic development—was emphasized. Other peoples might re-

gard Western cultures as more technologically developed yet morally backward, but the evolutionary theorists never considered this more relativistic view. Later systematic gathering of ethnographic data from traditional societies soon showed that they did not follow the same step-by-step evolutionary sequence. They developed in different ways, often by borrowing ideas and innovations from other societies. The San ("Bushmen") of the Kalahari and the aborigines of Australia, for example, are among the most supposedly "primitive" peoples in the world. Yet they are being introduced directly to industrial society, and are thus skipping the "stages" that, according to evolutionary theory, they should first pass through. By the 1920s, unilinear evolutionary theory in sociology and anthropology was dead as the dodo.

A Modern View: Multilinear Evolution

More recently, however, anthropologists have again developed an interest in social and cultural evolution. But this time they see the process as a *tendency*, not a universal "law," and they do not press the analogy between societies and living organisms. They point out, however, that societies generally tend to move from small-scale, simple forms of social organization to large-scale, complex forms. Modern anthropologists (for example, Steward, 1956) agree that this evolutionary process is *multilinear*. In other words, it can take place in many different ways and change does not necessarily follow exactly the same direction in every society. Unlike earlier theorists, modern anthropologists no longer believe that "change" necessarily means "progress." They do not assume that greater social complexity produces greater human happiness. This view, much more tentative than that of the early evolutionists, is now gradually finding its way into the mainstream of anthropological and sociological thought (for example, Lenski, 1966a; Lenski and Lenski, 1974; Fried, 1967; Parsons, 1966).

Cyclical Theories

The senseless slaughter of World War I and the growing signs of social disorganization and unrest in the industrial societies early in this century led many people to wonder whether social "change" really meant social "progress" after all. New theories of social change were now proposed—theories that focused instead on the *cyclical* nature of change as displayed in the rise and fall of civilizations. The assumption that Western civilization was the crowning achievement of history was questioned. Might not our civilization be destined, like all previous civilizations, to extinction? And if so, what forces were responsible for these cycles of change?

Figure 23.3 Cyclical theories of social change focus on the rise and fall of civilizations, attempting to discover and account for these patterns of growth and decay. This picture shows the ancient Inca city of Machu Pichu in Peru. Located on an isolated 8000-foot-high mountaintop in the Andes, it was deserted by its inhabitants several centuries ago, for reasons that are not known. The city remained "lost" until it was discovered in 1911.

Spengler: The Destiny of Civilizations

In 1918, a German schoolteacher, Oswald Spengler, published *The Decline of the West*. His sweeping, poetic account of the rise and fall of civilizations won wide readership and acclaim. The fate of civilizations, Spengler declared, was a matter of "destiny." Each civilization is like a biological organism and has a similar life cycle: birth, maturity, old age, and death. All creative activity takes place in the early stages of the cycle; as the civilization matures it loses its original inspiration, becomes more materialistic, and declines. Spengler studied eight major civilizations, including that of the West. He concluded that Western societies were entering a period of decay—as evidenced by wars, conflict, and social breakdown—that heralded their doom (Spengler, 1926; originally published 1918, 1922). Spengler's theory is out of fashion today. Although no sociologist would be so foolish as to reject the possibility that Western civilization and the societies that share it might ultimately be doomed, "destiny" is hardly an adequate explanation of social change. Spengler's biological analogy is clearly pushed too far, and his work is too mystical and speculative.

Toynbee: Challenge and Response

A somewhat more promising theory was offered by Arnold Toynbee, a British historian with considerable sociological insight. His multivolume work, *A Study of History* (1946), draws on material from twenty-one civilizations. Toynbee set out to discover and account for recurrent patterns in the rise and fall of civilizations. The key concepts in Toynbee's theory are those of "challenge" and "response." Every society faces challenges—at first, challenges posed by the environment; later, challenges from internal and external enemies. The nature of the responses determines the society's fate. The achievements of a civilization consist of its successful responses to challenges; if it cannot mount an effective response, it dies. Toynbee's work is more optimistic than Spengler's, for he does not believe that all civilizations will inevitably decay. History, he argues, is a series of cycles of decay and growth, but each new civilization is able to learn from the mistakes and to borrow from cultures of others. It is therefore possible for each new cycle to offer higher levels of achievement. Unlike Spengler's cycles, Toynbee's cycles build upon one another—rather like a circular staircase. His arguments, however, are not very persuasive. Toynbee uses a large number of illustrations to support his theme, but he uses them selectively and has been accused of ignoring counter-examples. He never fully explains why some societies mount effective responses to their challenges while others do not, or why a society should overcome one challenge but succumb to another. Few sociologists—or historians, for that matter—believe that the complexity of human history and social change can be explained through Toynbee's theory.

Sorokin: "Sensate" and "Ideational" Culture

The Russian American sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, made another attempt at a cyclical theory of social change. In his book *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937), Sorokin argues that Western civilization has always fluctuated between two cultural extremes, the "sensate" and the "ideational." Sensate culture emphasizes those things which can be perceived directly by the senses: it is practical, hedonistic, sensual, and materialistic. Ideational culture emphasizes those things that can be perceived only by the mind: it is abstract, religious, concerned with faith and ultimate truth. Sorokin believed that no society ever fully conforms to either type. For reasons that he never makes quite clear, too much emphasis on one type of culture leads to a reaction toward the other. Between the two lies a third type, "idealistic" culture. This is a happy and desirable blend of the other two, but no society ever seems to have achieved it as a stable condition. Again, this theory has won little support from sociologists. Sorokin's prejudices show through too clearly. He is obviously disgusted by modern society, which he believed to be in an "overripe" sensate condition, and he displays a nostalgic yearning for medieval society, which he believed was primarily ideational. His concepts of sensate and ideational culture are purely subjective, and he neglects evidence that conflicts with his theory. Furthermore, his theory is again purely speculative and descriptive: he offers no convincing account of how or why social change should take this form.

Evaluation

Cyclical theories of social change may at first seem attractive because they deal with an observed historical fact: all civilizations of the past have risen and fallen. But this does

not mean that historical and social change is necessarily cyclical. The fact that the sun has risen and set every day in recorded history gives us good reason to suppose that it will do so again tomorrow. Changes in human societies, however, are not subject to such inexorable "laws"—or if they are, the cyclical theorists have failed to discover them. To say that cyclical changes are caused by a tendency for change to occur in cycles explains nothing: it is like explaining the movement of an automobile in terms of its "automotive tendency." Cyclical theories also place too much emphasis on mysterious forces such as "destiny" and too little emphasis on human action. If, as is conceivable, a human society were to develop both the knowledge and the means necessary to control and direct social change, what would become of these supposedly inevitable cycles?

Functionalist Theories

Functionalist theories of social change start with the advantage that they deal with social statics before dealing with social dynamics. In the opinion of some critics, however, their very emphasis on social order and stability has prevented them from giving an adequate theory of social change (for example, Mills, 1959; Dahrendorf, 1958).

The functionalist perspective was introduced into modern sociology by Emile Durkheim, who examined several aspects of society by asking what function they played in maintaining the social order as a whole. Religion, he found, had the function of providing a common set of values that enhanced the social solidarity of the believers; the schools had the function of passing culture from one generation to the next. The American sociologist Talcott Parsons, drawing on the work of Durkheim and other early European sociologists—but not Marx—has tried to develop a general theory of social order based on the functionalist perspective.

Parsons' Theory of Social Order

Parsons' writings are highly abstract and make singularly difficult reading. The basic idea of his early writings, however, is not very complex. In brief, Parsons (1937, 1951) argued that a society consists of interdependent parts, each of which contributes to the maintenance of order and stability in the system as a whole. Society is able to absorb disruptive forces and to maintain overall stability because it is constantly straining for *equilibrium*, or balance. Cultural patterns, particularly shared norms and values, hold the society together. Because these patterns are inherently conservative, they also serve to resist radical changes.

The focus of Parsons' early writings was thus on social statics, not social dynamics. In his major work, *The Social System* (1951), Parsons devoted only one chapter to social change, which he saw as something that must be "introduced into the system." His approach thus failed to account for change: how could disruptions, even revolutions, occur in this stable, self-regulating system? Moreover, changes tended to be regarded as dysfunctions, as unwelcome irritants that disturbed the smooth functioning of the social system.

Throughout the forties and fifties, Parsons' work dominated American sociology. American society was enjoying a period of relative cohesion and stability, and Parsons' emphasis on society as a balanced system that integrated small yet necessary changes won wide acceptance. But the major social conflict in the United States in the late fifties and throughout the sixties raised many doubts about Parsons' assumptions. C. Wright Mills and other sociologists (for example, Lockwood, 1956) questioned whether a theory of equilibrium and stability was relevant to societies that were in a state of constant change and social conflict. In his later writings, Parsons (1961, 1966) confronted this problem and attempted to include social change in his functionalist model.

Parsons' Theory of Social Change

Parsons now sees change not as something that disturbs the social equilibrium but as something that alters the state of the equilibrium so that a qualitatively new equilibrium results. He acknowledges that changes may arise from two sources. They may come either from outside the society, through contact with other societies, or they may come from inside the society, through adjustments that must be made to resolve strains within the system.

Parsons also adopts what amounts to an evolutionary perspective on social change and tries to account for the changes that take place as a society becomes progressively more complex in its social organization. Two processes, he argues, are at work. In simple societies, institutions are undifferentiated: that is, a single institution serves many

different functions. The family, for example, is responsible for reproduction, education, economic production, and socialization. As a society becomes more complex, a process of *differentiation* takes place. Different institutions, such as schools and corporations, emerge and take over the functions that were previously undifferentiated within a single institution. But the new institutions must be linked together once more, this time by the process of *integration.* New norms, for example, must evolve to govern the relationship between the school and the home, and "bridging institutions," such as law courts, must resolve conflicts between other components in the system.

Evaluation

Parsons has rather neatly taken account of social change while keeping intact his emphasis on social equilibrium and stability. His work is now an ambitious attempt to explain both social statics and social dynamics, although his focus is still overwhelmingly on the former. Parsons' model remains limited, however, in that it does not presume to cover all possible forms of social change. It deals only with the institutional changes that take place as a society modernizes. Other functionalists have tried to overcome this difficulty by pointing out that there are strains and dysfunctions even in the most harmonious social system and that these tensions may cause social changes of many types. Robert Merton (1968), for example, writes of the "strain, tension, contradiction, and discrepancy between the component parts of social structure" that may lead to changes. In so doing, however, he is borrowing concepts from conflict theories of change.

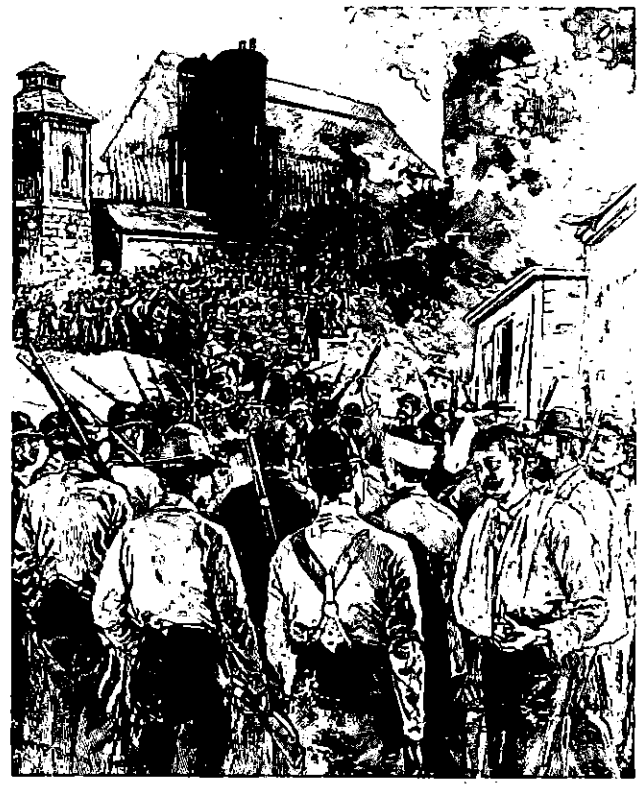

Figure 23.4 Conflict theorists see tensions and competition as a major source of social change. Thus conflict between capitalists and workers in the United States has led to many changes in industrial organization and working conditions. This engraving shows an 1892 battle between workers and agents hired by the employers.

Conflict Theories

Karl Marx declared that "violence is the midwife of history." In a similar vein, Mao wrote that "change comes from the barrel of a gun." The conflict theory of change, of which Marx is the most prominent and eloquent exponent, holds that change is caused by tensions between competing interests in society.

Marx: Change Through Class Conflict

"All history," Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), "is the history of class conflict." Marx believed that the character of social and cultural forms is influenced by the economic base of society—specifically, by the mode of production that is used and by the relationships that exist between those who own and those who do not own the means of production. History is the story of conflict between the exploiting and the exploited classes. This conflict repeats itself again and again until capitalism is overthrown by the workers and a socialist state is created. Socialism is the forerunner to the ultimate social form, communism. Marx's theories have been dealt

with in several previous chapters and need not be elaborated here. The essential point is that Marx and other conflict theorists after him see society as fundamentally dynamic, not static. They regard conflict as a normal, not an abnormal process, and they believe that the existing conditions in any society contain the seeds of future social changes.

Other Conflicts as Sources of Change

Later Marxist writers kept Marx's emphasis on class conflict as the source of social change, but other conflict theorists, although influenced by Marx, have focused on conflict between groups other than social classes. An early German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1904, 1955), pointed out that conflict is a permanent feature of society, not just an occasional or temporary event. Simmel regarded conflict as a process that binds people together in interaction. Although hate and envy may drive people apart, they cannot enter into conflict without interacting with their opponents. Moreover, conflict encourages people of similar interests to bind together to achieve their objectives. In this way, Simmel argued, continuous conflict keeps a society dynamic and changing. Ralf Dahrendorf (1958) regards the view that "all history is the history of class conflict" as an "unjustifiable oversimplification." He points to conflicts between racial groups, between nations, between political parties, and between religious groups as examples of conflict involving units other than social classes. All these conflicts, he believes, can lead to social changes.

Evaluation

Conflict over values and scarce resources is clearly a cause of social change. Conflict theory does not account for all forms of social change, but it does give us a means of analyzing some of the most significant changes in history and contemporary society. It can be applied, for example, to the overthrow of feudalism and its replacement by capitalist industrialism, or to the civil rights movement in the United States and recent changes in our patterns of race relations. Yet it is not a comprehensive theory of social change. Conflict theory cannot, for example, tell us why technology is having such a dramatic effect on the rate of social change in the United States. It cannot tell us why forms of family organization are changing. Above all, it cannot tell us much about the future direction of social change—and that is the acid test of a fully satisfactory theory. Even hard-line Marxists have been unable to predict successfully the countries or the periods in which socialist revolutions will occur, although they are able to provide plausible explanations of similar changes in the past. But a fully satisfactory theory must do more than explain history. It must also give us sufficient understanding of social dynamics for us to be able to predict, at least in broad outline, the future implications of present trends.

Some Sources of Change

When we move from the realm of general theory to the problem of finding the specific sources of social changes, our task becomes somewhat easier. There are a number of specific factors that, in their interaction with other factors, may generate changes in all societies. The precise nature and direction of the changes, however, depend very much on the unique conditions of the place and time in which they occur.

The Physical Environment

As we saw in Chapter 3 (Culture), the physical environment has a strong influence on the culture and social structure of a society. People living in mountainous regions must obviously evolve social forms different from those of people living in arid deserts or on tropical islands. The society and culture of Eskimos differ from those of Arab nomads in ways that are clearly related to the environments in which the two peoples live. The environment thus sets limits on the kinds of social changes that can occur. The Australian aborigines live on a continent that had no indigenous animals suitable for domestication and virtually no indigenous plants suitable for systematic cultivation. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they remained hunters and gatherers and did not become a pastoral, horticultural, or agricultural society. Even in the most advanced industrial societies, which are able to make significant changes in the natural environment, the environment still sets limits. We now realize, for example, that the limited capacity of the environment to tolerate pollution may restrict future industrial growth.

The physical environment, then, may influence the character of a society and its culture, and it may set limits on some forms of social change. But this is not the same as *causing* change. Social change that is directly caused by environmental factors is in fact quite rare. Severe earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, or droughts may cause changes in population structure or may even provoke migrations, but major environmental changes usually take place too slowly to have much impact on social life. Many environmental changes are actually caused by human action: much of the desert of North Africa and the land erosion of the Andes was caused by human interference in the ecology of these regions.

Most environmental influences on social change result from an interaction between social and environmental forces. Societies that have been located at geographic crossroads—such as those at the land bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa—have always been centers of social change. Societies that have been geographically isolated have tended to change less. It is no accident that the most "primitive" peoples of the world have lived in geographic isolation from other societies. The interaction of social and environmental factors undoubtedly generates social change, but environmental factors on their own rarely do so.

Ideas

What role do ideas, particularly belief systems or *ideologies*, play in social change? This question raises one of the oldest controversies in sociology. Karl Marx, who first raised the problem, argued strongly that social conditions shape people's ideologies, not the other way around. In his view, it is not the ideology of socialism that makes workers resent the oppression of capitalism; it is the oppression of capitalism that makes workers embrace the ideology of socialism. Similarly, Marx saw the ideology of capitalism as nothing more than an attempt to justify the capitalist system. Capitalism itself had been created not by an ideology but by the social forces that had overthrown feudalism and generated a new mode of production.

As we noted in Chapter 16 (Religion), Max Weber contested this view. He argued that the "Protestant ethic" of hard work and deferred gratification had spurred the development of the capitalist system. The failure of other, non-Western societies to develop capitalism, he believed, was partly due to their lack of a similar ideology. Weber thus gave ideas a much greater role in causing social change than did Marx. Durkheim took a broadly similar view. He accepted that ideas derive from social conditions but believed that they could then become independent "social facts" that could act back on society and cause social change.

There can be no question that ideologies are derived from social conditions and that people generally tend to accept belief systems that they believe, rightly or wrongly, conform to their own interests. In this sense Marx was correct. But it seems that Weber and Durkheim were equally correct in their view that ideas can also have a causal influence: that they can become "detached," as it were, from the social conditions in which they originally arose and can then have an independent effect on social action.

For example, Hinduism, a religious ideology, arose in a caste-based society and served to justify social inequality. This ideology is still influential in India, although it is inappropriate for a society that is attempting to modernize. The ban on artificial birth control by the Catholic church, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and other Christian groups stems ultimately from the stern morality of the ancient Israelites. The Israelites were a small people surrounded by enemies, and they placed high value on large families. This value was transmitted to Christianity and disapproval of artificial birth control eventually became part of the official doctrine of several churches, even though the origins of the value had been forgotten. The belief that birth control is somehow immoral is inappropriate, however, in developing nations where resources are limited and population is rocketing. Failure to introduce effective birth control methods will inevitably lead to major social changes in these countries, including changes caused by mass poverty and even mass starvation.

Ideas, often expressed in slogans, have been an important ingredient in many social changes. The cry for "Liberty, equality, fraternity" in the French Revolution influenced political events in that country and in many others. The concept of "the brotherhood of man" was used by those who wished to abolish slavery in the United States and elsewhere. Appeals to the ideal of "democracy" and "civil rights" helped swing American public opinion in

favor of extending the vote to women and to blacks. Yet none of these ideas existed in a vacuum; they were influential only in the context of other social forces.

Ideas are a particularly important element in social change in countries that are oriented to change as a way of life. The reason is that we try to shape the future in terms of our ideologies and our concepts of what the future should be like. Our ideas determine what we regard as needs, and we take social action to bring about the changes necessary to meet those needs. This is precisely what is happening in the less developed countries, which are attempting to modernize along the lines of the advanced industrial societies.

Technology

As we saw in Chapter 17 (Science), technology is a major source of social change. The more advanced a society's technology, the more rapid social change tends to be. As William F. Ogburn (1950) pointed out, technological change tends to be followed by changes in other parts of the social system, although there may be a *culture lag* while the other parts adjust. Technological innovations are usually accepted quite readily if they are obviously useful, but social norms and other cultural arrangements are more conservative and adjust much more slowly to changed material conditions.

A classic example of the effects of technological innovation, many of them unanticipated, is the introduction of the automobile to American society. Cars were initially used by the leisure class for recreation and for the ostentatious display of wealth. Their practical value was soon recognized, however, and Henry Ford used mass-production techniques to make them available to ordinary American families. The car has since become one of the most prominent features of the American landscape, with social effects that are almost impossible to calculate.

The automobile industry has become the largest single industry in the United States. The assembly line, first developed in the auto industry, has been duplicated in thousands of other manufacturing processes. Huge multinational corporations have emerged to produce millions of cars each year. New supportive industries have arisen to supply the raw materials for the manufacturing process. The petroleum industry has become a critical factor in

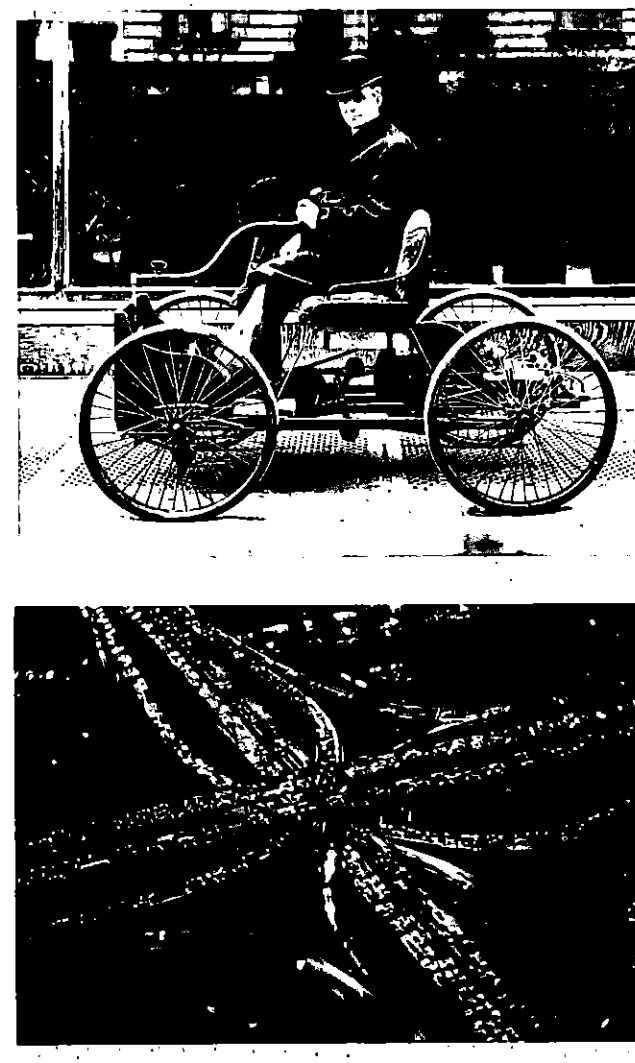

Figure 23.5 Technological change can be a major source of social change. A classic example is the introduction of the automobile to American society. Although the automobile was something of a curiosity in 1914, Henry Ford used mass-production techniques to make cars available to millions of Americans. The effects have been enormous. This innovation has not only changed the face of the landscape, but has also had incalculable social and economic effects. Most of these effects were not foreseen, and many of them were unwanted.

national and international politics and economics. A national system of roads and highways has been created at huge expense, linking communities and facilitating travel in a way that the railroad could never have achieved. Elaborate traffic laws have become necessary, and tens of thousands of Americans are killed in road accidents every year. Cities have become congested with traffic, and urban settlement patterns have drastically changed. New suburbs have been developed, whose residents commute by car to work in cities. The cities, faced with the loss of local taxes as the middle class flees to the suburbs, have been thrown into financial crisis. Motels and gas stations line the roads and highways, and drive-in banks, movies, and churches have appeared. Leisure and dating patterns have changed. Air pollution from auto exhausts has become a major problem, and diseases such as emphysema and lung cancer, whose incidence is closely related to air pollution, have become far more common. Few of these changes were anticipated and few of them were desired, but all can be traced directly or indirectly to a single technological innovation.

Population

Any significant increase or decrease in population size or population growth rates may disrupt social life. A population that grows too large puts impossible demands on resources. The result, as so often in history, may be mass migration, usually resulting in cultural diffusion and sometimes in wars as the migrants invade other territories. Or the result may be social disorganization and conflict over scarce resources within the society itself. A population that grows too slowly or that declines in numbers faces the danger of extinction. The latter problem is not one that most societies have to face, but the former—overpopulation—is probably the most pressing social problem in the contemporary world. If global population continues to increase at anything like its current rate, demands for food and other natural resources will become insupportable. Far-reaching social changes will follow, including an abrupt population decline as the death rate from starvation soars.

The size of a population also has a strong influence on social organization. In small, thinly settled populations, most relationships are primary: people know one another on an informal, face-to-face basis. In larger and more densely settled populations, social organization changes markedly. Secondary relationships multiply, new agencies of social control emerge, new institutions appear, and formal organizations replace informal groups. Population growth thus has important effects throughout social life.

Changes in the demographic structure of a population also cause social changes. The post–World War II "baby boom" in the United States gave our society a disproportionate number of young people, which made a massive expansion of educational facilities necessary in the fifties and sixties. As the "baby-boom" generation grows older, the United States will become "top heavy" with old people, resulting in still further social changes. If, like the old of previous generations, these people become politically conservative in later years, this fact will affect our political life. Medical science will focus increasingly on the problems of the aged, and geriatrics will become a growth area in medicine. New provision will have to be made for the elderly, probably through an extension of old-age homes and similar facilities. Existing schools will stand empty or be converted to other uses, and funeral parlors will enjoy an unprecedented boom.

"Events"

The term "events" is used by the sociologist Robert Nisbet (1969, 1970) to refer to random, unpredictable happenings that affect the course of social change. An assassin's bullet ended the Kennedy presidency, initiating the presidency of Lyndon Johnson and making possible his policies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. An alert night watchman noticed that a burglary was in process at the Watergate building in Washington, and set in motion a series of investigations that led to the downfall of Richard Nixon and to the presidency of Gerald Ford. Crucial battles have been lost by the mistake of a general, or abandoned because of superstitious fear of a solar eclipse.

Although a few sociologists (for example, McIver, 1942) have tried to deal with this random ingredient in social change, most have been reluctant to do so for the reason that "events" of this kind seem to fall beyond the scope of scientific analysis. As Nisbet points out, however, the actual event need not always be the decisive factor in social change. The system as a whole may sometimes be

"ripe" for change and the event may merely "trigger" it. Corruption and deceit in American politics is a problem of long standing. Sooner or later someone was likely to get caught, and that someone happened to be Richard Nixon. The United States has its share of psychopaths and lacks a responsible system of gun control; sooner or later someone was likely to assassinate a president. Attempts were made in recent decades on the lives of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Ford; the president who was fatally shot at was John Kennedy. To at least some extent, then, "events" can be explained in terms of existing social conditions. They are certainly a potential cause of major social change. Imagine, for example, the effect of nuclear war between the major powers as a result of human or electronic error. The often random nature of "events," however, poses a very difficult problem to any general theory of social change.

Cultural Innovation

Changes in a society's culture tend to involve social changes as well. Cultural innovation was discussed in Chapter 3 (Culture), and will only be summarized here. Three distinct processes are involved: discovery, invention, and diffusion.

Discovery

A *discovery* is the perception of an aspect of reality that already exists: the principle of the lever, a new continent, the composition of the atmosphere, or the circulation of the blood. A new discovery, if shared within the society, becomes an addition to the society's culture and store of knowledge. It becomes a source of social change, however, only when it is put to use. Europeans knew of other continents for centuries, but it was only when they colonized parts of these continents that social change resulted, in both the colonies and the countries that colonized them. The Greeks discovered the principle of steam power; in fact, a steam engine was built as a toy in Alexandria around 100 A.D. But the principle was not put to serious use for nearly 1700 years after it was discovered.

Invention

An *invention* is the combination or new use of existing knowledge to produce something that did not exist before. Inventions may be either material (can openers, cigarettes, spacecraft) or social (corporations, slavery, democratic institutions). All inventions are based on previous knowledge, discoveries, and inventions. For this reason, the nature and rate of inventions in a particular society depends on its existing store of knowledge. The cave

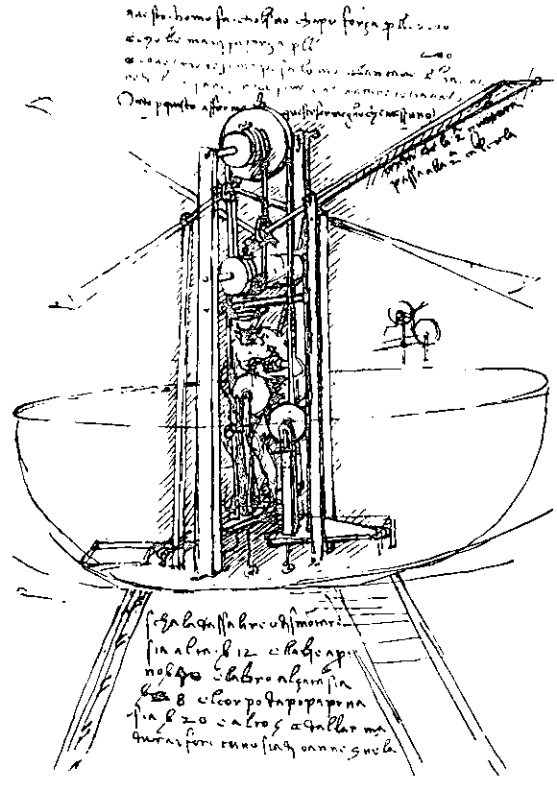

Figure 23.6 Leonardo da Vinci produced this sketch of a helicopter (powered by human muscle) in the fifteenth century. Many of Leonardo's designs for new machines were workable in principle and were centuries ahead of their time. But the machines could not be constructed, for his society lacked the technological knowledge to construct and power them. Rapid technological innovation is possible only in a society that already has a large store of knowledge to draw on, for all inventions are based on previous knowledge.

dweller has little knowledge to work with, and merely to produce a bow and arrow is a considerable intellectual achievement. We are no cleverer than our "primitive" ancestors; we simply have more knowledge to build on. As Ralph Linton (1936) remarked, "If Einstein had been born into a primitive tribe which was unable to count beyond three, lifelong application to mathematics probably would not have carried him beyond the development of a decimal system based on fingers and toes." Leonardo da Vinci, working in the fifteenth century, produced plans for many machines that were workable in principle, including helicopters, submarines, machine guns, air-conditioning units, aerial bombs, and hydraulic pumps, but his society lacked the technology necessary to build them.

SIMULTANEOUS DISCOVERIES AND INVENTIONS

Discovery of the planet Neptune	By Adams (1845) Leverrier (1845)
Discovery of oxygen	By Scheele (1774) Priestley (1774)
Logarithms	By Napier-Briggs (1614) Burgi (1620)
Photography	By Daguerre–Niepe (1839) Talbot (1839)
Kinetic theory of gases	By Clausius (1850) Rankine (1850)
Discovery of sunspots	By Galileo (1611) Fabricius (1611) Scheiner (1611) Harriott (1611)
Laws of heredity	By Mendel (1865) DeVries (1900) Correns (1900) Tschermak (1900)

Source: William F. Ogburn, *Social Change* (New York: Viking, 1922), pp. 90–122.

Figure 23.7 These are some of the 150 discoveries and inventions that William Ogburn found had been made almost simultaneously. In most cases the inventors were unaware of one another's work. They all lived in similar cultures, however, and so had access to the same store of cultural knowledge. Once sufficient knowledge has accumulated in a particular field, new inventions become almost inevitable.

Inventions occur exponentially: the more inventions that exist in a culture, the more rapidly further inventions can be made. To take a simple example: three elements can theoretically be combined into six new combinations, four into twenty-four, five into one hundred and twenty-five, and so on. Given a sufficient cultural store of knowledge, new inventions become almost inevitable. Ogburn (1950) listed 150 inventions that were made almost simultaneously by different scientists living in the same or similar cultures (see Figure 23.7). This fact helps to explain why the modernization process took so much longer in those societies that had to make the necessary discoveries and inventions than it did in those societies that merely had to adopt them from others.

Diffusion

The process of *diffusion* involves the spread of cultural elements—both material artifacts and ideas—from one culture to another. George Murdock (1934) has estimated that about 90 percent of the contents of every culture have been acquired from other societies, and some social scientists (for example, Kroeber, 1937) see diffusion as the main source of cultural and social change. The most outstanding contemporary social change—the spread of the modernization process around the world—represents the diffusion of industrialism from the advanced to the less developed societies. Each culture accepts elements from other cultures selectively, however. Material artifacts that prove useful are more readily accepted than new norms, values, or beliefs. Innovations must also be compatible with the culture of the society into which they diffuse. For these reasons, white settlers in America accepted the Indians' tobacco but not their religion.

Human Action

A final and obvious source of social change is human action, which may bring about social changes whether they are intended and foreseen or not. Two types of human action are particularly important: the acts of powerful leaders and other individuals, and the collective behavior of large numbers of people.

The precise influence of individuals on the course of history and social change is very difficult to judge. Take the case of Julius Caesar. As a general in the army of the

Figure 23.8 Diffusion is the process by which cultural elements spread from one society to another. These judges in the African state of Uganda have adopted the wigs of their former British rulers. Although the judicial wigs have survived in Uganda, British legal principles have not: material artifacts are usually more readily accepted into a culture than nonmaterial elements such as ideas.

Figure 23.9 One of the most important sources of social change is human action, particularly the concerted action by social movements such as that for women's liberation. These movements actively intervene in the course of social history, attempting to influence the direction of change.

Roman republic, he made the historic decision to cross the river Rubicon, march on Rome, and overthrow the republican form of government, replacing it with a dictatorship. His act led directly to an imperial form of government, and the empire passed from him through his adopted son Augustus to tyrants such as Nero and Caligula. If Caesar had not taken that step, the Roman republic might have survived; Augustus, Nero, Caligula, and the rest would not have become emperors; and the entire history of the Western world would have taken a different course. Or would it? We cannot know. We cannot conduct an experiment in which we remove Caesar from the scene and wait to see what happens.

Historians and biographers have often taken what is sometimes called the "great man" theory of history and social change. Sociologists have generally rejected the approach, taking the view that history makes individuals rather than that individuals make history. Sociologists see the personality and ambitions of leaders, like those of anyone else, as being strongly influenced by the culture in which they were born and socialized. From the sociological perspective, the social changes that individuals appear to have created are interpreted as the product of deeper social forces. Caesar could destroy the Roman republic only because it was already on its last legs; fifty years earlier his act would have been impossible and even unthinkable. If he had not acted when he did, others might have done so instead, and later events might have followed a broadly similar course. Similarly, World War II cannot be attributed simply to the personality and ambitions of Adolf Hitler. Hitler certainly influenced the course of events, but if there had not been severe social, ethnic, and economic strains in Germany at the time, he might never have come to power or have had the opportunity to put his policies into effect.

The role of collective action in social change poses less difficulty. Collective behavior, from fads and fashions to riots, social movements, and revolutions, is an attempt by people to change their social environment (Smelser, 1962). Large-scale movements—for women's liberation, civil rights, national independence, religious conversion, and so on—are a vital source of social change. So, too, are the actions of other social agencies and institutions, particularly governments that determine policies in the deliberate attempt to change society.

Conclusion

Where does this survey leave us? Let's look first at the problem of a general theory of change, then at the specific factors that can cause changes, and then at the prospects for predicting change in the future.

Prospects for a General Theory

Some of the theories that attempt to explain social change are clearly unsatisfactory, and no single theory seems able to account for all social change.

Cyclical theories of change seem unacceptable. They are too speculative, too subjective, and they give no explanation of how or why change takes place. *Unilinear evolutionary* theories are also unacceptable, for they are based on faulty data about other cultures. *Multilinear evolutionary* theory, however, may prove more useful. It seems to fit the facts: societies generally tend to evolve from the small and simple to the large and complex. They do so in different ways, but a change in the mode of production is always involved, usually culminating in industrialism. The theory also helps explain why these changes take place. The more elaborate a culture becomes, the greater the probability of new invention and discovery. And the more efficient the mode of production becomes, the greater use a society is able to make of its environment. It is able to produce a steadily greater economic surplus, which permits population growth, urbanization, and modernization. But the theory is not fully satisfactory, for it explains only one dimension of social change—the evolution of societies from simple to complex, from preindustrial to industrial. It tells us nothing, for example, about wars, revolutions, migrations, and other important forms of change.

Functionalist and *conflict* theories seem at first sight to be at odds with one another, and indeed the debate between advocates of each view became quite heated during the sixties. If we look at the basic assumptions of each approach, the contrast seems quite glaring.

1. Functionalist theory holds that every society is relatively stable; conflict theory holds that every society is in a process of continuous change.

2. Functionalist theory holds that every society is well integrated; conflict theory holds that every society experiences continuous conflict and tension.

3. Functionalist theory holds that every element in society contributes to its functioning; conflict theory holds that every element in society contributes to its change.

4. Functionalist theory holds that every society is held together by the common values of its members; conflict theory holds that every society is held together by the coercion of some of its members by others.

As Ralf Dahrendorf (1958) points out, however, each part of all the above statements is true, although they may seem contradictory. The reason for the paradox lies in the paradoxical nature of society itself. Societies *are* stable, enduring systems, but they *do* experience conflict and continuous change. The functionalist and conflict approaches are merely focusing on different aspects of social reality: one mainly on statics, one mainly on dynamics.

There seems to be no logical reason why the two theories cannot be integrated to a considerable extent (Smelser, 1967; Gouldner, 1970; Van den Berghe, 1963). As we have noted, Merton has introduced the concepts of "strain" and "tension" from conflict theory into functionalist theory. In a similar vein, Lewis Coser (1956) has written about the "functions" of conflict in society. Conflict, Coser points out, can be functional for the social system because it prevents stagnation and generates necessary changes.

Evolutionary theory, in its multilinear form, is compatible with either functionalist or conflict theory. If we take an evolutionary perspective on social change and combine it with functionalist or conflict theory—or, where appropriate, with both—we have the best general theory of social change. It remains an imperfect theory, admittedly, but it provides a rich understanding of many forms of social change.

Interacting Factors in Social Change

The essential point about specific sources of change is that change is never the product of any one factor. As Parsons (1966) reminds us: "No claim that social change is determined by economic interests, ideas, personalities of particular individuals, geographic conditions, and so on, is

acceptable. All such single-factor theories belong to the kindergarten stage of a social science's development. Any single factor is always interdependent with several others." No change can be explained or understood without reference to a series of interacting factors and to the society and culture in which it takes place. Existing conditions determine which changes will be accepted, which will be rejected, and which will be adopted in modified form. The highly conservative rulers of Tibet were able to keep the wheel out of their mountain kingdom for almost a thousand years. Sub-Saharan African peoples, to whom cattle are a form of wealth, have refused to practice "rational" stock-rearing methods that would give them fewer but healthier cattle. Islam is being accepted more readily than Christianity in many parts of Africa, largely because it is not seen as a "white" religion and because it permits polygyny, which most African peoples practice. A broad range of changes is acceptable in the United States because we are a change-oriented culture with a commitment to science, technology, and the pursuit of a better society.

Predicting the Future

To what extent does our present understanding of social change permit us to predict the future? We are able to do so within limits, particularly for those societies that have not yet reached our level of industrial development. Our society and other advanced industrial societies such as the Soviet Union provide the mirrors in which developing societies can see the outlines of their own futures, and sociological analysis enables us to predict the general lines that social change in these countries will follow. But when we look to our own future we have no example to guide us. We can, however, make fairly confident predictions about specific areas of society. We can anticipate the likely effect of population growth and we can project the future trends in urbanization, for example. When it comes to predicting the overall form of our society in the future, however, we are in real difficulty.

There is no shortage of attempts to predict this future. Daniel Bell (1973) has written about a new "postindustrial" society, characterized by increased affluence, automation, and leisure time. Alvin Toffler (1970) has written about a society in a permanent state of "future shock," where technological and social change takes place much faster than peoples' ability to adjust to it. William Ophuls (1974) describes a "scarcity society," in which depletion of resources leads to a lower standard of living and a strong, authoritarian state that regulates conflict between groups struggling for their piece of the diminishing pie. These are very different predictions, for the reason that each writer focuses on one or a few aspects of change in the modern United States and projects this trend, largely through guesswork, into the future. Lacking any general theory of social change, these and other writers cannot provide a systematic and persuasive picture of the future. Until an adequate theory of social change is produced, such a picture will continue to elude us. The task of producing that theory remains no less a challenge today than it did when the new discipline of sociology was born.

Summary

1. Social change is the alteration in patterns of social structure, institutions, and behavior over time. The process is universal but occurs at different rates and in different ways. Social change is often difficult to analyze because we lack a full understanding of social statics and because changes usually have very complex origins.

2. Evolutionary theories hold that societies evolve from simple to complex forms. Early ethnocentric theorists believed that the process was unilinear and culminated in Western civilization. Social Darwinists believed that some societies or groups prospered because they were better adapted to the conditions of life. Many modern social scientists believe that evolution is multilinear and takes many forms. They also refuse to equate "change" with "progress."

3. Cyclical theories hold that change recurs in cycles over time. Spengler believed societies have life cycles and that their fate was a matter of "destiny." Toynbee believed that societies advance or decline according to their "responses" to "challenges." Sorokin believed that cultures fluctuate between "sensate" and "ideational" forms.

4. Functionalist theories focus mainly on social statics. Parsons, however, sees change as a process by which the

social equilibrium is altered so that a new equilibrium results. This process takes place through differentiation and integration.

5. Conflict theorists, influenced by Marx, see conflict as intrinsic to society and as the main source of social change. The theory explains some change but has not given very accurate predictions in the past.

6. Some specific sources of change are the following: (a) the physical environment, which sets limits on change although it rarely causes change; (b) ideas, which in interaction with other factors can generate change; (c) technology, which generates changes in society and culture, often causing a culture lag; (d) cultural innovation, which takes the forms of discovery, invention, and diffusion; and (e) human action, in the sense that individuals, groups, and agencies such as governments can influence social change.

7. Cyclical theories are too speculative and are not explanatory. Unilinear evolutionary theories were based on faulty data. Multilinear evolutionary theories seem useful but explain only one dimension of change. Functionalist and conflict theories seem to contradict one another but actually focus on different aspects of the same reality. Multilinear, functionalist, and conflict theories may sometimes be combined to explain many forms of social change. Change is never the result of one specific factor; several factors always operate together.

8. Although we can predict the course of change in some aspects of society, a fully satisfactory general theory of change has still to be developed.

Important Terms

social change
dynamics
statics
evolutionary theories
unilinear evolution
social Darwinism
multilinear evolution
functionalist theories
equilibrium
differentiation
integration
ideology
culture lag
discovery
invention
diffusion

Suggested Readings

BELL, DANIEL. *The Coming of Postindustrial Society.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

A leading prophet of the "postindustrial society" explains why and how we are entering that stage and outlines the characteristics of this new social form.

ETZIONI, AMITAI, and EVA ETZIONI-HALEVY. *Social Change.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

An important collection of articles on various aspects of social change. The book includes excerpts from the writings of several classical and modern theorists on the subject.

GOULDNER, ALVIN. *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology.* New York: Avon, 1970.

An important book on sociological theory. Gouldner argues strongly that aspects of conflict and functionalist theory can and should be combined to produce a better understanding of social processes.

MEAD, MARGARET. *Culture and Commitment.* New York: Doubleday, 1970.

An anthropologist examines the effect of rapid technological change on modern societies, placing particular emphasis on the cleavage that change can create between the generations.

OGBURN, WILLIAM F. *Social Change.* New York: Viking, 1950.

A classic work in the field. Ogburn presents his concept of "culture lag" and discusses the social disorganization that technological changes can create.

SWANSON, GUY E. *Social Change.* Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971.

A survey of theory and research on social change from several disciplines, including history and sociology.

TOFFLER, ALVIN. *Future Shock.* New York: Random House, 1970.

A lively and provocative book, in which Toffler argues that social change is now taking place faster than our capacity to adjust to it. The book has been a best-seller.