

CLASSICAL THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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With so many social changes occurring at such a rapid pace, social researchers are more than ever trying to explain and interpret these events. These attempts are not new, but are actually as old as man himself. The classical theories of change can be subsumed under one of three broad categories.

Some theorists have employed a linear model. Spencer (1) borrowed from Darwin the biological evolution formulation and applied it to society. Likewise, Comte used a progressive sequence accounting for new forms. These stages of history were designated theological, metaphysical, and positivistic. Comte (2) believed that eventually man would be able to measure empirically and explain conclusively all forms of social behavior in the latter stage.

Two other similar models can be seen in the writings of Durkheim (3) and Toinnes (4). Whereas Spencer thought that the social analyst should study the evolution of society from its simple to complex forms, both Durkheim and Toinnes provided specific typologies in this attempt. Durkheim spoke of a division of labor where modern societies have become more specialized. Thus, his typology reflected the shift from mechanical solidarity where there was a consensus of norms to an organic solidarity where people are highly interdependent on one another. Similarly, Toinnes used types designated *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to account for the same phenomena. However, Toinnes contrasted the predominate community life of the past with the business life of the present society.

The second category of classical views of change is the cyclical. The Greeks were the first to utilize this model. Plato spoke of eras of time when, initially, hope blossoms only to deteriorate as that era disintegrates. Spengler's (5) view of change was very similar to that of the Greeks, but his model was dressed in a biological rather than astrological garb. Culture, according to him, is the living entity of people, and culture is housed in the civilization of that

era. The pattern is such for each culture that it arises, develops, ripens, decays and falls never to return. An element of hope, however, was predicted in a similar model by Toynbee (6), who believed the cyclical change could be interrupted by the creative minority. More recently Sorokin (7) considered that social changes follow a trendless cyclic pattern, i.e., like a swinging pendulum, culture moves in one direction and then back in another. According to Sorokin, a culture has three distinct systems of truth, viz., ideational, idealistic, and sensate. Ideational truth comes from God, while idealistic comes both from God and the senses. In the sensate society only sensory truth is valid and valuable.

The third and final category for grouping classical views of social change is the dialectic. Hegel (8), like the Greeks, sought for reality in the absolute idea. Every idea and all of history goes through the dialectic process whereby an idea (thesis) develops, is challenged by an opposite idea (antithesis), and merges into a new form (synthesis). The synthesis then becomes the thesis and the process, according to Hegel, begins over again. The importance of this theory can be seen in the writing of Marx (9). Marx too viewed history as moving in a dialectic pattern. However, for him the prime mover was materialism and not idealism. Thus, Marx was an economic determinist for he saw the material forces of production as the substructure of all society.

Even though these theories reflect the dominate thinking of men in a particular sociohistorical setting, and even though their development occurred over a period of many years, some common criticism is possible. Most of these theories are speculative and somewhat subjective when compared with contemporary analysis. True, Durkheim and Sorokin used some empirical indicators, but these were exceptions. The others failed to quantify their research. Next, the concepts have surplus meaning; they are vague and somewhat ambiguous. Furthermore, the theorists failed to account for extraneous or intervening variables.

This is true partly because most authors were social philosophers and not social scientists. Thus, theories as objective, scientific, and positive explanations of human behavior were not developed. Most were historical comparison on a broad macro-level of analysis (Boskoff, 10; Martindale, 11).

Today theories of change follow several patterns. Some are isolated studies dealing with attitude change, change in family structure, or societal change, such as "death by dieselization" by Cottrell (12). Other theories today reflect attempts to account for development of society. For instance, Mott (13) uses population increase, in size and density, to demonstrate changes in social relations and organizations. Olsen (14) uses terms like urbanization, bureaucratization, industrialization, and centralization to describe a process of social evolution. Finally, others build models which reflect more concern for measurement than for actual fit with reality. Today computer and complex statistical analysis seem to be preferred over accuracy in explaining the real phenomena.

Whatever approach we employ, several difficult issues must be considered. First, we must determine what the unit of change is. Is it culture, society, or individuals? The next issue is, what elements are changing, i.e., are they attitudes, behavior, or institutions? Likewise, we must decide exactly what constitutes change. How does one prove that a change has in fact occurred? Finally, the problem of measurement, direction, and rate must be handled. Inkeles (15) has more elaborate discussion on these points.

To summarize, changes are taking place

now as never before. The question is how can we best develop models of social change. Examination of classical views can help, but there are problems here too. What we must do is make a priori decisions and select measures that have empirical roots. The task is not easy, but the need and, hopefully, rewards are great.

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