

Examrace

Competitive Exams: Social Change

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The term social change is used to indicate the changes that take place in human interactions and interrelations. Society is a web of social relationships and hence social change means change in the system of social relationships. These are understood in terms of social processes and social interactions and social organization. Auguste Comte the father of Sociology has posed two problems-the question of social statics and the question of social dynamics, what is and how it changes. The sociologists not only outline the structure of the society but also seek to know its causes also. According to Morris Ginsberg social change is a change in the social structure.

Evolutionary Theories

Evolutionary theories are based on the assumption that societies gradually change from simple beginnings into even more complex forms. Early sociologists beginning with Auguste Comte believed that human societies evolve in a unilinear way-that is in one line of development.

According to them social change meant progress toward something better. They saw change as positive and beneficial. To them the evolutionary process implied that societies would necessarily reach new and higher levels of civilization.

LH Morgan believed that there were three basic stages in the process: Savagery, barbarism and civilization. Auguste Comte's ideas relating to the three stages in the development of human thought and also of society namely-the theological, the metaphysical and the positive in a way represent the three basic stages of social change. This evolutionary view of social change was highly influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of Organic Evolution. Those who were fascinated by this theory applied it to the human society and argued that societies must have evolved from the simple and primitive to that of too complex and advanced such as the western society.

Herbert Spencer a British sociologist carried this analogy to its extremity. He argued that society itself is an organism. He even applied Darwin's principle of the survival of the fittest to human societies. He said that society has been gradually progressing towards a better state. He argued that it has evolved from military society to the industrial society. 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 got widespread popularity in the late 19th century. It survived even during the first phase of the 20th century. Emile Durkheim identified the cause of societal evolution as a society's increasing moral density. Durkheim viewed societies as

changing in the direction of greater differentiation, interdependence and formal control under the pressure of increasing moral density. He advocated that societies have evolved from a relatively undifferentiated social structure with minimum of division of labor and with a kind of solidarity called mechanical solidarity to a more differentiated social structure with maximum division of labor giving rise to a kind of solidarity called organic solidarity.

Cyclical Theories

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. Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin can be regarded as the champions of this theory. Spengler pointed out that the fate of civilizations was a matter of destiny.

Each civilization is like a biological organism and has a similar life-cycle, birth, maturity, old-age and death. After making a study of eight major civilizations including the west he said that the modern western society is in the last stage i.e.. Old age. He concluded that the western societies were entering a period of decay as evidenced by wars, conflicts and social breakdown that heralded their doom.

Toynbee

Arnold Toynbee's famous book 'A study of History' (1946) focus on the key concepts of challenge and response. Every society faces challenges at first, challenges posed by the environment and later challenges from internal and external enemies. The nature of responses determines the society's fate. The achievements of a civilization consist of its successful responses to the challenges; if cannot mount an effective response it dies. He does not believe that all civilizations will inevitably decay.

He has pointed out that history 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 level of achievement.

Sorokin

Pitirin Sorokin in his book Social and Culture Dynamics-1938 has offered another explanation of social change. Instead of viewing civilization into the terms of development and decline he proposed that they alternate of fluctuate between two cultural extremes: The sensate and the ideational.

The sensate culture stresses those things which can be perceived directly by the senses. It is practical, hedonistic, sensual and materialistic. Ideational culture emphasizes those things which can be perceived only by the mind. It is abstract, religious concerned with faith and ultimate truth. It is the opposite of the sensate culture. Both represent pure types of culture. Hence no society ever fully conforms to either type.

As the culture of a society develops towards one pure type, it is countered by the opposing cultural force. Cultural development is then reversed moving towards the opposite type of

culture. Too much emphasis on one type of culture leads to a reaction towards the other. Societies contain both these impulses in varying degrees and the tension between them creates long-term instability. Between these types lies a third type 'idealistic' culture. This is a desirable blend of other two but no society ever seems to have achieved it as a stable condition.

Functionalist or Dynamic Theories

In the middle decades of the 20th century a number of American sociologists shifted their attention from social dynamics to social static or from social change to social stability. Talcott Parsons stressed the importance of cultural patterns in controlling the stability of a society. According to him society has the ability to absorb disruptive forces while maintaining overall stability.

Change is not as something that disturbs the social equilibrium but as something that alters the state of equilibrium so that a qualitatively new equilibrium results. He has stated that changes may arise from two sources. They may come from outside the society through contact with other societies. They may also come from inside the society through adjustment that must be made to resolve strains within the system. Parsons speaks of two processes that are at work in social change.

In simple societies institutions are undifferentiated that is a single institution serves many functions. The family performs reproductive, educational, socializing, economic, recreational and other functions. A process of differentiation takes place when the society becomes more and more complex. Different institutions such as school, factory may take over some of the functions of a family. The new institutions must be linked together in a proper way by the process of integration. New norms must be established in order to govern the relationship between the school and the home. Further bridging institutions such as law courts must resolve conflicts between other components in the system.

Conflict Theories

Whereas the equilibrium theories emphasize the stabilizing processes at work in social systems the so-called conflict theories highlight the forces producing instability, struggle and social disorganization. According to Ralf Dahrendorf the conflict theories assume that every society is subjected at every moment to change, hence social change is ubiquitous. Every society experiences at every moment social conflict, hence social conflict is ubiquitous. Every element in society contributes to change.

Every society rests on constraint of some of its members by others. The most famous and influential of the conflict theories is the one put forward by Karl Marx who along with Engel wrote in Communist Manifesto 'all history is the history of class conflict.' Individuals and groups with opposing interests are bound to be at conflict. Since the two major social classes the rich and poor or capitalists and the proletariat have mutually hostile interests they are at conflict.

History is the story of conflict between the exploiter and the exploited. This conflict repeats itself off and on until capitalism is overthrown by the workers and a socialist state is created. What is to be stressed here is that Marx and other conflict theorists deem society as basically dynamic and not static. They consider conflict as a normal process. They also believe that the existing conditions in any society contain the seeds of future social changes. Like Karl Marx George Simmel too stressed the importance of conflict in social change.

According to him conflict is a permanent feature of society and not just a temporary event. It is a process that binds people together in interaction. Further conflict encourages people of similar interests to unite together to achieve their objectives. Continuous conflict in this way keeps society dynamic and ever changing.

Factors of Change

Physical Environment

Major changes in the physical environment are very compelling when they happen. The desert wastes of North Africa were once green and well populated. Climates change, soil erodes and lakes gradually turn into swamps and finally plains. A culture is greatly affected by such changes although sometimes they come about so slowly that they are largely unnoticed. Human misuse can bring very rapid changes in physical environment which in turn change the social and cultural life of a people.

Deforestation brings land erosion and reduces rainfall. Much of the wasteland and desert land of the world is a testament to human ignorance and misuse. Environmental destruction has been at least a contributing factor in the fall of most great civilization. Many human groups throughout history have changed their physical environment through migration. In the primitive societies whose members are very directly dependent upon their physical environment migration to a different environment brings major changes in the culture. Civilization makes it easy to transport a culture and practice it in a new and different environment.

Population Changes

A population change is itself a social change but also becomes a casual factor in further social and cultural changes. When a thinly settled frontier fills up with people the hospitality pattern fades away, secondary group relations multiply, institutional structures grow more elaborate and many other changes follow.

A stable population may be able to resist change but a rapidly growing population must migrate, improve its productivity or starve. Great historic migrations and conquests of the Huns, Vikings and many others have arisen from the pressure of a growing population upon limited resources. Migration encourages further change for it brings a group into a new environment subjects it to new social contacts and confronts it with new problems. No major population change leaves the culture unchanged.

Isolation and Contact

Societies located at world crossroads have always been centers of change. Since most new traits come through diffusion, those societies in closest contact with other societies are likely to change most rapidly. In ancient times of overland transport, the land bridge connecting Asia, Africa and Europe was the centre of civilizing change.

Later sailing vessels shifted the centre to the fringes of the Mediterranean Sea and still later to the north-west coast of Europe. Areas of greatest intercultural contact are the centers of change. War and trade have always brought intercultural contact and today tourism is adding to the contacts between cultures says Greenwood. Conversely isolated areas are centers of stability, conservatism and resistance to change. The most primitive tribes have been those who were the most isolated like the polar Eskimos or the Aranda of Central Australia.

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