

SOCIAL CHANGE – BETWEEN THE CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES IN THE XXTH CENTURY

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Abstract: In this article we have presented the most important theories about social change from the perspective of comparative analysis (XIXth and XXth century). Thus, in the first part of the article, we have presented the classical perspectives on social change, which belong to some famous sociologists from the XIXth century, who have approached this issue: Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, or Karl Marx. The common point of these theories is that they all understand social change as a social progress. This idea is no longer found in the twentieth century, where the theoretical approaches to social change are equally varied. Thus, the second part of the article presents the theories of change from four sources: the ‘Chicago School’ (William Ogburn and William I. Thomas); the neo-evolutionary theory of Robert Nisbet; the French Sociology perspective (Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon) and, finally, a more actual perspective, that of Anthony Giddens.

Keywords: social change; evolution; social progress; conflict perspective; contemporary perspectives.

Introduction

Whether it's the 19th or the 20th century, in sociology, the theme of social change can be understood and addressed in a number of ways: on the one hand, there are authors who focus on the endogenous or exogenous factors of change; on the other hand, there are studies that analyse the forms or processes of social change, that emphasize conflicts or aggregation effects, which highlight a cyclical perspective of social change analysis.

According to the *Dictionary of Sociology*, social change consists in “passing of a social system or its component from a state to another qualitatively and / or quantitatively different state”¹.

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¹ Cătălin Zamfir, Lazăr Vlăsceanu (eds.), *Dicționar de sociologie*, Bucharest, Babel Publishing, 1993, p. 521.

According to Henri Mendras (1983), “we can define short-range changes, which essentially belong to journalism, medium-term changes, which are of particular interest to the sociologist and long-term changes, which are interesting to study by every historian”². We have selected this definition because the term *social change* was often associated with Henri Mendras because he had largely contributed to its actual meaning, as a legitimate concept and object of research, replacing the old expression of *social dynamics* (A. Comte) and especially the many terms derived from it such as *progress* (Saint-Simon, A. Comte) or *evolution* (H. Spencer, A. Comte, E. Durkheim) and which were either too vague or charged with affective connotations.

On the one hand, approaching the same paradigm as Weber, Marx, or Boudon, Henri Mendras states that social change is very often associated with conflict: we move from order to disorder. On the other hand, he concludes that “there is no general theory of social change and it is impossible to conceive one, since it would be a general theory of history”³.

Regarding the theoretical approach and the analysed reference area, the term is the result of temporal analysis of acts, phenomena, processes, human behaviours, from one or another domain (social, economic, organizational, cultural, technical, scientific, political, etc.). But in order to reflect and appreciate the changes in time, scholars are using many terms: *transformation*, *progress*, *growth*, *evolution*, *development*, *reproduction* etc. For the characterization and appreciation of the social and economic evolution, sociologists that we have taken into consideration for this article are using especially the concepts of *change*, *development* and *progress*.

Social change can be defined as “an observable transformation over time that affects the structure and the functioning of a society’s social organization, in a manner that cannot be temporary or ephemeral, and which changes the course of its history”⁴. We find the same definition also in other papers which define de social change as “a phenomenon that is most often irreversible, altering the structures of society and altering the course of its history”⁵.

Classical perspectives on social change: from Comte to Tocqueville

Present, during the nineteenth century in the works of Comte, Durkheim or Marx, and later in some articles and studies from the beginning of the twentieth century, such as, for example, the studies of E.A. Ross (1904) and Sumner (1909), the notion of *social change* was introduced, in its modern sense, by William

² Henri Mendras, Michel Forse, *Le changement social: tendances et paradigmes*, Paris, Armand Colin Publishing, 1983, pp. 39-46.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴ Adrian Neculau, *Psihologie socială*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2005, p. 226.

⁵ Thierry Rogel, *La matrice de Louis Dirn: une approche du changement social à “moyenne portée”*, “DEES”, 110, décembre 1997, p. 56; *apud* Guy Rocher, *Introduction à la sociologie générale*, Toronto, HMH, 1968, p. 22.

Ogburn in 1922 (in the paper entitled *Social change. A study on the effects of technology on society*).

Auguste Comte's point of view on social change can be detached, in particular, from Volume V of the *Course in Positive Philosophy* (orig. title – *Cours de philosophie positive*)⁶, where the author exposes the theory of the three stages of humanity. Practically, Comte's approach is to present the history of humanity (*le Grand Etre* – as the author names it), starting from its three phases: theological, metaphysical and positive (scientific).

Thus, in Comte's view, if "change in the social system can be examined in the case of static sociology or social *physiology*, *societal change* (the change of the social system itself) calls for a complementary framework of analysis, which is dynamic sociology. This change is governed by the *law of three stages* correlated with the other two sociological laws of the dynamic analysis"⁷.

Each of these three stages (which are, in fact, theoretical systems), taken into account in their relationship with history, has a profound influence on society and politics, because in Comte's view, society as a whole is like a living organism whose development is influenced by the intellectual progress. Since ideas lead people, intellectual development and, above all, scientific development, are the most advanced form of progress that can serve as the engine of changing the historical framework⁸. And because society is a living organism (according to the organic theory of society), all the constituent elements of society are interdependent, and a change that occurs at the level of a single element, for example, in the intellectual life, induces changes in the whole social organism.

Auguste Comte considered that all social changes were generated by the scientific knowledge. Thus, in Comte's view, social evolution also automatically means social progress (which it classifies in two types: *progress in scientific knowledge* and *economic progress*), an idea that we no longer find in neo-evolutionist theoreticians of the XXth century. According to their conception that we will describe in the following paragraphs not every evolution necessarily implies social progress.

A theoretical approach to social change (an evolutionary vision, more precisely) is also found to Emile Durkheim, in the paper entitled *The Division of Labour in Society* (orig. title – *De la division du travail social*)⁹, in which the French sociologist promotes the idea that as societies evolve, the division of labour is increasingly occurring, and societies evolve from traditional ones (based on mechanical solidarity) to developed ones (based on organic solidarity). As a result

⁶ See Auguste Comte, *Curs de filosofie pozitivă, Vol. V – Partea istorică a filosofiei sociale*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2004, p. 374.

⁷ Ilie Bădescu, *Istoria sociologiei. Perioada marilor sisteme*, Galați, Porto-Franco Publishing, p. 22.

⁸ Mary Pickering, *Le positivisme philosophique: Auguste Comte*, in "Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques", volume 67(2), 2011, pp. 49-67.

⁹ See Emile Durkheim, *Diviziunea muncii sociale*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing, 2008, pp. 57-64.

of the evolution process, occurs also the integration of individuals, which is a horizontal process: for Durkheim, social change is related to the change of societies, which, in its turn, is related to the division of labour.

When the population in a society is small and scattered over a vast territory, it can survive without resorting to a complex division of labour; families and family groups across the country do not economically harm themselves and can rely on the same resources (agriculture, hunting, fishing) using the same techniques. When the population grows and at the same time becomes denser, the survival of the group is only possible if there is a division of tasks, specialization and complementarity of functions.

From this observation, Durkheim draws the following general proposition: “The division of labour varies in direct proportion to the volume and density of societies, and if it progresses in a continuous manner during social development, is that societies become regularly denser and very generally more voluminous”¹⁰.

Demographic density is not the cause only of the division of labour; its scope is much more extensive. Indeed, demographic density provokes what Durkheim called ‘moral density’. As people are closer together, their relations are multiplying, diversifying and intensifying, resulting in ‘general stimulation’, greater creativity, and thus, an increase in the level of civilization of every society.

Unlike Comte and Durkheim, Max Weber approaches the conflict perspective of analysing social change, linking it to social conflict. According to him, individuals are in a permanent conflict with each other, in order to gain a higher status; in fact, the three stratification criteria that he analyses are “the social class (based on economic differences), the status (based on prestige), and the party (based on political power)”¹¹.

Thus, the conflict allows us to conquer the resources of power, prestige, and material wealth, being a driver of social change (an idea that we will find also at Karl Marx) and thus, allow the individual to rise to the social hierarchy, gaining more and more prestige. Essentially, this is a theoretical perspective of social Darwinism that promotes the struggle for survival and the survival of the best.

The views on social conflict and social change have been extensively exposed in *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (orig. title – *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*)¹², a work in which the author starts his approach from the statement that before the Industrial Revolution there was a radical change of ideas and mentalities. This radical change of ideas took place especially among Protestants (being created by Jean Calvin), which opposed Catholic prayers at that time. Practically, the change to which Weber refers is the progress of Protestantism, to the detriment of Catholicism, along with the progress

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Dumitru Otovescu, *Sociologie generală*, 5th edition, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2009, p. 357.

¹² See Max Weber, *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*, Bucharest, Incitatus Publishing, 2003.

of values and beliefs that have contributed to the emergence and development of the Industrial Revolution¹³.

While admitting that other factors may intervene in this process, Max Weber will emphasize the dissemination of new values. In particular, he asserts that capitalism (the economic system) was the product of Calvinism (a system of values). According to him, “the process of rationalization of social activities” is the most significant feature of modern society and especially of the modern West¹⁴. Weber is therefore a forerunner of “methodological individualism”¹⁵, a sociological approach which argues that social phenomena result from individual actions, idea that we will find also to Alexis de Tocqueville.

For his part, Alexis de Tocqueville find in “democracy”, in other words in equality of conditions, the main source of social change. This author argued that it is the possibility offered to every individual to access any status that allows a society to transform itself. Tocqueville gives the individual a leading role in social change. It is this posture that makes him, according to R. Boudon, the pioneer of methodological individualism. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville theorizes social change by endeavouring to understand the transition from an aristocratic social state to a democratic social state. “What makes it possible is the lasting and irresistible progression of equality of conditions. First of all, it is a political and legal equality, an equality of rights. The individuals of democratic times are citizens who cannot be differentiated by privileges; there are no more castes”¹⁶.

According to Karl Marx, the contradictions between labour and capital, or socially, between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are the facts that led inevitably to the class struggle, the Marxist scheme relying on an endogenous theory of social change¹⁷. Marx demonstrated that the introduction and refinement of tools, division of labour and private property divide people into social classes (exploiters class and exploited class). Alienation and contradiction – expressed through class struggle – are oppressive and dehumanizing, but, in the same time, absolutely necessary for the general progress of human society¹⁸. Conflict is therefore, in turn, the cause and

¹³ Dumitru Otovescu, *Istoria sociologiei. Antologie de texte. Din antichitate și până la începutul secolului al XX-lea*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2007, pp. 266-279.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ According to *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, “methodological individualism is the requirement that causal accounts of social phenomena explain how they result from the motivations and actions of individual agents, at least in principle”; [online], definition available at the following: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/methodological-individualism>. For more informations, see Raymond Boudon, *Cele două forme ale individualismului metodologic*, in Dumitru Otovescu (ed.), *Tratat de sociologie generală*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2010, pp. 145-165.

¹⁶ Éric Kessler, *Question sociale et démocratie chez Tocqueville*, Paris, SCEREN-CNDP, 2004.

¹⁷ Bernard Valade, *Schimbarea socială*, in Raymond Boudon (ed.), *Tratat de Sociologie*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2006, p. 385.

¹⁸ Camelia N. Morariu, Mihaela D. Ignat, *Conexiuni teoretice socioeconomice: teoriile schimbării sociale*, in “Journal of Social Economy”, no.1/2011, Bucharest, Hamangiu Publishing, pp. 9-10.

consequence of social change, and the interaction of these factors generate and influence the evolution of our societies.

For Marx, “the most important changes were related to the development of capitalism. Capitalism is a production system that radically contrasts with previous economic systems in history, as it involves the production of goods and services sold to a wide range of consumers. In his view, in the future capitalism will be replaced by another society, without the differences between the rich and the poor. He did not mean to say that all the inequalities between individuals will disappear. Rather, societies will no longer be divided into a narrow class that holds the monopoly of economic and political power, and the great mass of the people, who benefit very little from the goods they create through their work. The economic system will be governed by the common property and we will have a more egalitarian society than the one currently known”¹⁹.

The paragraphs above show that social change has been interpreted differently. Only, as can be seen, most ‘classics’ have often had a mono-causal approach to this phenomenon. For the majority of contemporary sociologists, social change is such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that it cannot obey any determinism or any single cause. It is rather the result of several factors at once, even if they can be prioritized.

As Anthony Giddens is pointing out, “no single factor theory does not explain all the social changes, and some major influences on change are distinguished, one of which is adaptation to the material environment. Among others, we can also mention the physical environment, political organizations and cultural factors”²⁰.

Why do societies change? A XXth century sociology approach: from the American perspective of the ‘Chicago School’, to the European sociology of R. Boudon and A. Giddens

During the twentieth century, the most important schools of thought have changed the macro-sociological approach with the micro-social approach, limiting their study to social organizations and institutions, in particular through the comparative method. Also, regarding the problem of evolution and social change, contemporary sociology these two concepts based on the organizational principles of the Western industrial societies.

As we will see from the paragraphs below, for the twentieth century theorists, not every social evolution also means social progress. One of the thinkers who illustrated this idea was the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who considered that “the evolution of society does not necessarily mean *going in the right direction*, that social progress is not perfect, that it can even be called a

¹⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Sociologie*, 3rd edition, Bucharest, ALL Publishing, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 573-574.

regress, since societies become more evolved only after paying high costs, which lead to a decrease in satisfaction of the individuals from every society”²¹.

Very representative for the sociology of the 20th century is the “Chicago School”, where ‘symbolic interactionism’ was developed as a sociological current, but it was also a school of urban sociology, and an ethnography school.

According to the Chicago School, social change is an inevitable process, driven by industrialization, urban explosion, racial group interaction, labour specialization. On the other hand, “the more socio-human behaviour is precisely subordinated to rational norms or lines of action, the more the imminent social change will be more progressively directed; the rationality of change cannot be achieved, therefore, without rationalizing the individual behaviour; this is not possible through the normative integration of the individual (because normative integration would obstruct the change), but by stimulating the individual creativity”²².

Within this school of thought, the concept of social change was analysed and developed by William Ogburn in *Social Change with Respect to Culture and Original Nature* (1922), which is a study of the effects of technology on society²³. Basically, in this paper, William Ogburn “traced direct connections between such development as the inventors of the automobile self-starter and the emancipation of women. When it became easy for them to drive cars, they entered the business world and thus changed their role and the nature of their family relationships”²⁴.

Also, in this book Ogburn introduced the concept of “cultural lag” (for which he remained known in contemporary sociology) to describe that “a period of maladjustment occurs when the non-material culture is struggling to adapt to new material conditions”²⁵. In fact, the role of technology in producing social change was also recognized by Alvin Toffler, who appreciated that global technology’s change through the development of microelectronic technologies was equivalent to the emergence of the ‘third wave’ in the evolution of societies²⁶.

On the other hand, within the Chicago School, more precisely within the theory of social organization/disorganization (developed by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki), it is reiterated that the main cause of social disorganization is social change, which “determines the output from the system of some components because

²¹ For a more complex analysis, see Ferdinand Tonnies, *Comunitate și societate. Despre comunism și socialism ca forme empirice de cultură*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2016.

²² Stefan Costea, *Istoria generală a sociologiei. Compendiu*, 2nd edition, Bucharest, “România de Măine” Foundation, 2004, p. 333.

²³ Benoît Godin, *Innovation Without the Word: William F. Ogburn’s Contribution to the Technological Innovation Studies*, in “Minerva”, 48(3), 2010, pp. 277-307.

²⁴ Edmore Mutekwe, *The impact of technology on social change: a sociological perspective*, in “Journal of Research in Peace, Gender and Development”, Vol. 2(11), 2012, p. 229, [online] available at <http://www.interestjournals.org/JRPGD>.

²⁵ Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 8th Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2009.

²⁶ For more informations, see Alvin Toffler, *Al treilea val*, Bucharest, Politic Publishing, 1983.

they are no longer in harmony with other parts of the social system. Modern change brings a deep and often generalized disorganization of traditional themes²⁷.

The concept of social change is also found in the neo-evolutionary theory, more precisely in the work of Robert Nisbet, who is considered to be the main representative of sociological antievolutionism. In his view, “change is not and cannot be only an empirical change. Real or empirical change is always a change of something, somewhere and sometime, and therefore any theory of change must introduce variables of time, place, and circumstance”²⁸. Thus, by rebuilding the social change analysis framework, promoting an empirical approach, Nisbet believed that any change is produced by events and any event is produced by a change.

Considering the evolutionism of the 19th century as being outdated, and approaching a functionalist perspective, Parsons attempted to answer the question: *Why do societies change?* And he built his answer to this question, starting from the analysis of society as a social system, merged from 4 subsystems: social, economic, political and cultural one.

Although changes occur in all societies, however, says Parsons, in each society there is the resistance to change, which occurs through the “rationality trend”; however, it is more about “a resistance imposed by those interested in preserving the existent social order, and not those for whom that order represents their domination and exploitation”²⁹. Thus, social rationalization can both determine social change, but also be an obstacle to social change.

Although he considers that sociology is not conceptually mature enough to explain social change, Parsons aims to explain “how social order (capitalist) is possible and not how it can be changed; how can the capitalist type of social rationality be maximized and not how it generates its own change”³⁰.

In his view, change is only a secondary process, which refers to the transformation of social structures, because most social processes do not aim to change structures, but to maintain them. Thus, from an analytical point of view, there is no difference between changing and preserving the structures³¹.

In Europe, sociological theories dealing with social change are numerous, but for this paper we will summarize the theoretical perspectives elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon (in France) and Anthony Giddens (in the UK).

In French sociology, it is in the analysis of social change that one finds the greatest doctrinal diversity: from the critical sociology (P. Bourdieu) who sees only

²⁷ Ilie Bădescu, *Noologia. Cunoașterea ordinii spirituale a lumii. Sistem de sociologie noologică*, Bucharest, Mica Valahie Publishing, 2002, pp. 276-278.

²⁸ Dumitru Otovescu, *Teorii și curente sociologice contemporane. Note de curs*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2003, pp. 49-50.

²⁹ Ștefan Costea, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

³¹ Talcott Parsons, *Societies, Evolutionary and Comparative perspectives*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1966, p. 21.

the struggles in the change, to the individualist sociology (R. Boudon) which rejects the general theories of change, any process being 'dated and signed'. The doctrinal debate between Bourdieu and Boudon is outlined in the 1970s, the two sociologists representing two opposite theoretical trends. Thus, as a reaction to Mendras's statement that believed we live in a society where '*everything is changing and that's very good*', Bourdieu believes that this apparent change (for example, school massification) conceals a real absence of change, the maintenance of social order and the reproduction of elites"³².

Boudon's thought is based on the logic that social change is the result of imbalances in the individual decisions of agents, which can provoke a global reaction when they are aggregated. For example, the choice of studies (duration, course) is valued according to expected gains and costs, which reflects an unequal opportunity between the well-to-do and popular classes. Thus the increase in the duration of studies does not necessarily lead to greater social mobility³³.

Today's French sociologists agree to Boudon's perspective: that it is almost impossible to define a theory of social change. For Raymond Boudon, this would be a "capacity to state [on society] interesting and verifiable propositions whose validity is not limited to a specific spatial and temporal framework but of a more general scope"³⁴.

Thus, contrary to the sociological perspectives developed by A. Comte and K. Marx, Boudon promotes the idea that modern sociological analysis is not interested in forecasting long-term changes in society, but rather explains the evolution of certain well-defined social phenomena³⁵. In a paper from 1990, the French sociologist noted that "while not seeing the laws of history, another obsession of sociology was to seek the fundamental factor of social change. Today, most sociologists are convinced that research of the laws of history and the dominant factors of change is a dilemma and an obstacle"³⁶.

To Giddens, social change is relevant and can be analysed in terms of the following five concepts: "Structural principles, inter-societal systems, time-space edge, episodic characterizations, and world time"³⁷.

Moreover, Giddens (1984) criticizes the evolutionary theories from social sciences and states that "these theories which explains social changes must have

³² The theory is explained in Pierre Bourdieu et Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1970.

³³ Raymond Boudon, *L'inégalité des chances*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1973; Idem, *Efecte perversă și ordine socială*, Bucharest, Renaissance, 1998.

³⁴ Idem, *Tratat de sociologie*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1997; Chapter 8: "Schimbarea socială", pp. 355-397.

³⁵ Idem, *La place du désordre: critique des théories du changement social*, 3e édition, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, pp. 44-49.

³⁶ Idem, *Texte sociologice alese*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, p. 164.

³⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, California, University of California Press, 1984, p. 244.

some distinctive meaning and characteristics, such as conceptual continuity with biological evolution, social evolutionism must specify something more than just a progression of change in respect of certain designated criteria, that something being a mechanism of change, and a sequence of stages of social development must be specified, in which the mechanism of change is linked to the displacement of social organizations by others”³⁸.

In another work, published in 2007, Anthony Giddens analyses the social change, by reference to the period of globalization, a period when the state of welfare is in danger of collapse. According to the British sociologist, globalization is not the main cause of this decline, but “endogenous structural change directly linked to the process of globalization”³⁹. The problem of awareness of the need for social change, even at the level of the big EU economies, is essential, and Giddens uses in his analysis the concept of *blocked societies*, which are “societies in which the need for change is evident not only for its citizens, but also for those observers more informed, but either natural conservatism or group interests, or both, prevent the necessary reforms”⁴⁰.

Conclusion

Change is a process inherent in all human societies and therefore has been an important subject of analysis for classical sociology in the nineteenth century as well as for the sociology of the twentieth century.

The paradox of modern change has been well illustrated by the American sociologist Daniel Chirot: industrial societies are still confronted with various economic, social and ideological problems with “confusion about the decline of common solidarity and the feeling of dissatisfaction with the material comfort [...]”

The advanced, industrialized and democratic societies, which, according to the public opinion, seem so sceptical about rapid changes and sudden social movements have managed to direct these changes much better than the rigid agrarian societies of the past, or than the highly centralized, non-democratic ones, from the modern world”⁴¹.

The fact that it has been analysed from a macro-sociological or micro-social, quantitative or qualitative perspective, with a special interest for the factors that determine it (demographic, technological, cultural, ideological), for its (linear, multiline, cyclical) forms, social change represents a complex concept and, at the same time, an extensive process, specific to all human societies. If during the nineteenth century social change is analysed rather in terms of *evolution* and *progress*, during the twentieth century, the most common concepts used by the sociologists are *change* and *development*.

³⁸ Taner Çam, Mustafa Kayaoglu, *Social Change from the Perspective of some Prominent Contemporary Sociologists*, in “Journal of International Social Research”, no. 7(34), 2014, p. 631.

³⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Europa în epoca globală*, Bucharest, Ziua Publishing, 2007, pp. 29-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 21, 61-72.

⁴¹ Daniel Chirot, *Societăți în schimbare*, Bucharest, Athena Publishing, 1996, pp. 210-211, 221.