

PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL CHANGE, AGAIN?

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Abstract This concise paper presents a critical glance over the theories of social change and over the new challenges facing those who wish to understand change in the contemporary world.

The first part deals with the discussion of the idea of progress which underlies all the classical sociological explications of global social change – should it be ‘social change’, ‘change in society’ or ‘change of society’? – and provides a much needed overview of the themes to which sociologists, such as Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Aron and others gave priority.

The second part is a reflection on the extent to which sociology is equipped to enunciate ‘laws of transformation’ or to determine the causes of change. For this, the author refers to Raymond Boudon’s *La place du désordre* (1984) whose critical contribution represents an openness to accept a less ‘scientific’ view of sociology and highlights the importance of the ‘spirit of adventure’ in sociological analysis.

Closing remarks are made on the present challenges for sociology in the contemporary world where it may be possible to envisage an ‘Oriestern’ civilisation, combining characteristics from the East and the West.

During discussions held in preparation for the XI World Congress of Sociology, some people suggested, half in jest, that the keynote for the meeting should be borrowed from Daniel Bell’s book on ideology in a more cruel version: ‘The end of sociology’.

Some of the sociologists on the ISA Executive Committee felt that very few novelties have emerged, in the field of Grand Theory at least, from a reading of sociological journals and papers published in the last ten years. Not without envy, this generation has seen anthropology bask in the limelight, with structuralism and Foucault’s ‘critique of culture’, leaving professional sociologists somewhat lacking in imagination, and without the necessary zest even to tackle ‘middle-range’ theories.

Esprit de corps has prevailed, however, and here we are with redoubled creative vigour, ready to discuss the most classic of sociological themes: theories of social change.

Suffice it to cast but a critical glance over these theories: it will easily be seen that in spite of everything there are new ideas to expound, and that far from withering away, sociology is pressing ahead with the task of delineating fresh programmes for research and interpretation.

What then are these new ideas?

I shall proceed with my introductory exposition in two sections: the first deals with subject matter, and the second with modes of interpretation. I shall leave the section on techniques to more competent specialists in the field.

New themes in theories of change

‘Social change’ or ‘change in society’ or ‘of society’ were constantly recurring designations – defined by conflicting and opposed theories – during

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sociology's classical age. It was the summit of theoretical ambition to aspire to determine the 'laws' of social evolution.

Underlying these notions was the old idea of 'progress', revived by the Enlightenment and victorious in the nineteenth century. Sociology contemptuously ignored the scepticism of the historians as to 'general processes' of change, and proceeded unruffled with its search for regularities which could explain global social changes.

More modest in their ambitions, the post-classical and post-critical sociologists (if I may thus designate the Kantians *à la Weber*) remained convinced of the nomothetic value of social science but were more emphatic in applying their passion for generalising about change to partial aspects of society (changes *in* society, but not in the type of society). To a large extent, they focussed on the transformational action of active social agents in processes of interaction (individuals and groups), rather than on action at the level of structures (reforms and revolutions) or even that of key institutions in society (such as property and the state).

Here we encounter a major change in the themes to which sociologists gave priority. While Durkheim had taken the *social division of labour*, a universal process, to study the more general and recurring aspects of change through his 'average types' and to put forward 'laws' which applied to each basic form of 'transhistoric' sociability; while Marx had taken the grand historical transitions (from feudalism to capitalism, to socialism) as the theme of his investigation...; since Weber (in this respect also a classic: 'The rise of modern capitalism'), the sociology of action had redefined contemporary subject matter.

It may be Parsons, more than any other, who offers the major paradigm of post-war sociology. In him there is a unique combination of a general explicative technique (extracted from Weber's ideal types) with a highly specific focus on the object and the theme of study: the nuclear family, for example.

Here we have change, but not *a* theory of change – we have *theories* in the plural. And it was the structural functionalism of Parsons and Merton that gave sociology in the 1950s both its grand model to explain change (the sum of dysfunctionalities, incomplete socialisation, unattained values and even contradictions seen as 'incompatibilities' between the demands of the social situation and the actors' role-playing) and the scope of its explanation: delimited social processes.

The most significant work of this period refers to partial themes in society, even when it breaks with structural functionalism; and it makes no reference to the global analysis of processes and patterns of change from one type of society to another. Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) is a brilliant example of non-functionalist analysis, but it is confined within these parameters. *The American Soldier* (1950), by Stouffer and Lazarsfeld, is more faithful to structural functionalism.

Exceptions: Parsons himself and his immense sociological retinue studying the 'passage' from traditional to modern societies. In this case, though, there are no 'laws of passage' as such, but a polar characterisation, which is more *à la Tönnies* than *à la Weber*, distinguishing idealised types. No analogy – not even remotely – can, however, be made between these efforts and what could be called 'scientific methods' for analysing regularities and transformations of them. Whereas in Weber (or in Parsons' specific studies) there is in addition to typology an explanation (which fits in with both causes and meaning), in what it has become conventional to call 'modernisation theory' – or rather in this theory's formal tradition – there is no explanation proper but a characterisation. The changes which occur are characterised by opposition, but there is no attempt to explain their causality, sequences or forms.

After the sixties, and especially during the seventies, sociology underwent a further inflection. A dual inflection. Neo-Marxism, on the one hand and, on the other, a renewed preference for themes linked to change in fundamental components of contemporary society, even in terms of the tradition of 'empirical' or structural-functionalist analysis.

Neo-Marxism developed out of two non-exclusive origins: an academic rereading of Marx (Althusser, Poulantzas etc.), and the incorporation of the themes of economic development and dependence into studies of contemporary societies. While the return to themes on change was not global, it dealt with more general aspects of contemporary societies, and also started from two main sources: comparison (with divergings and convergings) between capitalist and socialist societies, and the discrediting of the gradualist version of changes in modern competitive societies. The former source includes a range of work, from the somewhat linear studies of the effects of 'industrialism' in unifying politically and socially diverse societies, to more richly nuanced studies such as those of Raymond Aron (1962), where the themes of liberty, power and the limits of reason are reclaimed for the purposes of analysing industrial societies.

As to the second of these two sources, it would be more appropriate to say that two things became discredited concomitantly: the gradualist vision of social change and the vision of 'class conflicts' as the privileged fount of change in modern societies. Though there was not properly speaking a systematic and consistent critique of the theory of social classes and revolution, sociologists gradually switched their interest from the analysis of the working class (as in Georges Friedman [1964] or Serge Mallet [1969]) to the analysis of 'new actors'.

Here again we have change, but change brought about by factors and actors which had not been contemplated by classical sociology, with its overriding interest in global societal change. Replacing the Marxist notion of productive forces – social relations of production – superstructure, there arose the idea that change could emerge out of conflicts occurring at any level of society. Thus, the May 1968 revolt was said to be an embryonic struggle between the 'producers of knowledge' and the masters of society, personified by the state.

The bureaucracy and the state, rather than the bosses, were the 'enemy' of society's new liberators, those who based their critique on a rupture with cultural values.

The sixties were full of new practical challenges and new sociological approaches. To a certain extent, there was a shattering of the self-confident idea of 'progress', as formulated by Western (Judaean-Christian) civilisation. Not for lack of the material presuppositions of this belief: the very accumulation of knowledge and technologies undermined the notion that human solidarity and moral and spiritual values would accompany the march of civilisation and economic growth. The Vietnam War (the new horrors of war seen on TV all over the world), religious intolerance, and the rebirth of regionalism; rediscovery of the theme of inequality among races and between the sexes; and the obsession with the nuclear holocaust, in the shape of the bomb and of nuclear-powered reactors (Three Mile Island and Chernobyl) – all these factors combined to recreate social actors and nourish the contemporary world's fears and anguish.

The Western world's self-confident vision, with its tranquil theories of modernisation or tempestuous theories of revolution, assumed, up to the fifties, that there was a degree of compatibility between 'economic growth', 'transformational social forces' and human well-being. Since the sixties, this serene confidence has broken down.

According to the more sceptical or pessimistic observers, such as Robert Nisbet (1980), for example, the five basic premises which turned the dogma of progress into the mainspring of Western civilisation have now disappeared. They were:

1. faith in the value of the past
2. the conviction that Western civilisation was noble and superior to the rest
3. acceptance of the value of economic growth and technological breakthroughs
4. belief in reason and scientific knowledge
5. belief in the intrinsic importance of life in the universe.

Evidently, there is no need to go all the way with Nisbet's pessimistic subjectivism. It is merely a symptom of the phenomenon I wish to explain. But it demonstrates that both the perverse effects of economic growth (not so much the maldistribution of its benefits, but only the destruction of natural resources, many of which are unrenowable) and the discrediting of 'Western civilisation', together with the other factors mentioned, undermined faith in reason, especially in the sense of essentially 'Western' reason.

The new themes of social change have much to do with this process. New social actors: whether they be Alain Touraine's 'social movements', women's demands, black struggles, grassroots movements, or Latin America's 'ecclesiastical base communities' – none of these appears in the classic texts of sociology or of any sociologists before World War Two.

There can be no denying that even a Sartrean conversion to Marxism as the 'ideology of our time' cannot diminish collective existential anguish: the fear of atomic death and the holocaust, the virtual horror of unintentional destruction caused by atomic energy, of the new white plagues (such as Aids), or urban violence etc., coexist with the glorious civilisation of space exploration, information technology and biogenetics.

When theories of social change are assessed in the light of contemporary reality, it must be admitted that the 'Grand Theories' have suffered substantial blows. True, Weber would seem to have hit the mark with his intuitions foreseeing disenchantment with the world and the spreading grip of bureaucracy. But neither entrepreneurs nor leaders with an authentic political vocation have rescued society from routine. And a more detailed examination shows that the theory of the Calvinist ethic – and hence of values – as the prime mover of capitalist accumulation has had to undergo Trevor-Roper's (1972) transplant in order to survive a little longer.

Theories of modernisation and the countless studies inspired by Parsons (1952) which set out to show how the gap between traditional and modern is filled by moving on from 'ascription' to 'achievement', or any other pair of formal oppositions, run up against research on all sides showing how history has been much more capricious.

Hagen's (1962) work on Colombia or Olson's (1978) on the 'logic of collective action', to mention only a few examples, constitute formal models in the best of hypotheses, not explanations of real processes of change. Similarly, in political science, S.M. Lipset's (1967) claim to explain democratic institutionalisation in Latin America, or Rostow's (1953) famous book on the stages of economic growth, are thwarted in the most conspicuous manner by the sheer facts.

Marxist theory of social change cannot be said to be any better off: the long-awaited revolution has not occurred where it was expected, nor in those countries where it has, has the proletariat necessarily been the class which has taken the lead in conducting social change. Not to mention the fact that religious conflicts and aspirations to national independence (the latter more easily assimilable to the Marxist paradigm of change) have replaced the *sans-culottes* and the workers since the war.

But it matters less to lament the disappointing failures of past theory to forecast the future than to reaffirm that current sociology has at least been able to delineate new themes and to try to understand the dynamics of contemporary societies with a perspective which is more open to the variability of historical processes.

It is as if anthropology had taught sociologists the vital lesson that, while the simplistic, abstract models of the economists are useful to create analytical categories which can help to describe and even to foresee market behaviour, they cannot serve as a paradigm for describing and interpreting (let alone anticipating the future course of) social processes which are also cultural and therefore which have to be seen in the light of possible options and innovations.

In this context, rather than weeping with Nisbet for the loss of a dogma, it is better to understand that intercommunication among cultures and societies in today's world destroys any egocentric urge to see the Western world as the only model, and the road momentarily followed by some European countries or by the USA as the highway to freedom, equality and the general good. But this realisation should not lead to the opposite conclusion: that the industrial civilisation and the cultural models of the West lack historic weight and the capacity for action. The point is that in the clash of interests and values each society reconstitutes the process at a given historical moment (or perhaps particular segments within each society, in differential fashion). Solutions may be 'amalgamated', and a duplicity or plurality of patterns of social structure, forms of organisation and culture may be developed; Western solutions may even be utterly rejected (or almost, as in the Iranian case). Rather than 'one single theory', theories of change. Rather than 'the privileged actor', a kaleidoscopic panoply of agents for change. Instead of 'one single outcome' of a homogenising, universal type, a more diversified distribution which is richer in historic alternatives.

This would seem to be the lesson we have to learn from contemporary theories of social change.

Types of interpretation

Studies of social change have also provided an especially fertile ground for the debate on the scientific foundations of sociological explication. To what extent is sociology equipped to enunciate 'laws of transformation'? Is there determinism in the strict sense, or are there merely trends? What are the types of explication produced by these possible laws – are they imperatives for change derived from the *structure* of the situation or are they conditional laws? Is it possible to determine the *causes* of change?

Raymond Boudon's *La Place du Désordre* (1984) is a highly intriguing recent work which provides a framework for discussing these questions. Boudon says there are four distinct types of theory on social change and one of these types has an important variant. What Boudon is indicating is that these distinct theories are what Imre Lakatos (1970), the philosopher of science, calls 'programmes', that is, general orientations followed by segments of the scientific community in their research work. These orientations, or this 'programme', are based on the postulate that it is possible to enunciate interesting propositions concerning social change, and that these propositions

are verifiable and nomothetic (i.e. their scope surpasses a given temporal and spatial context).

The first type of theory identified highlights more or less general and irreversible trends. For example, the passage from particularism to universalism in modern societies, as in Parsons. These 'tendential laws' are often little more than intuitions which cannot be statistically proven. Or they may be more sophisticated and set out to define the existence of *stages* (as in Comte's laws of the three stages or, more modestly, Rostow's stages of economic growth).

The second type of theory of change takes the form of 'conditional laws' structured along the lines of 'If A occurs, B will follow'. When Parsons (1952) suggests that the effect of industrialisation is to reduce families to the size of the 'nuclear family' (parents and children), he is formulating a theory of this type. So is Tocqueville (1952) when he says the liberalisation of a despotic regime leads to a violent reaction against it and not to a gradual acceptance of the improvement obtained.

This second type of explication of change has a major variant, when element A is not a condition or a single variable but a *system* of variables. In this case, it is a question of looking for laws of structure, as for example when it is said that the semi-feudal system tends to be stable because the user of land, although formally free to sell it, tends to be constantly in debt to the owner, who is not favourable to the introduction of innovations which could raise productivity of the land or of labour. Another example is Nurske's (1953) theory of the 'vicious circle of poverty', which states that at a time t a poor country has every chance of remaining poor for $t + 1$ unless there is an exogenous shock, because poverty entails a low capacity for saving and investment, preventing a rise in productivity.

The third type of theory does not set out to explicate the content of change but its form. Thus Michel Crozier (1970) attempts to show that in France change is destined to take the form of long periods of blockage followed by periods of crisis; in Crozier's view, this is because cultural factors lead members of an organisation to adapt to problems that arise without discussing or questioning them, until an explosion occurs.

The fourth type of explication of change in Boudon's classification deals with the *causes* or *factors* which produce it. Classic examples can be found in Weber and Marx, especially in the 'dialogue' between them on the question whether values (as in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) are uppermost in the explication of capitalist accumulation, rather than social relations of production and the productive forces.

The mere act of listing these various types of attempt to explain change sociologically is enough to show the variability in the scope or range of each one as far as the theoretical precision attainable is concerned, as well as the complexity of the factors involved in what is to be explained. On the other hand, the 'laws', 'regularities' or 'intuited sequences' arrived at have very different theoretical and epistemological statuses. Boudon (1984 : 192)

recommends, for example, that a 'well-tempered determinism' should be adopted: 'with regard to social change, determinism is therefore not an indispensable postulate but a 'constat' which it is suitable to adopt or not depending on the case'¹.

There are certain processes, Boudon says, where a state at $t+1$ can be determined on the basis of knowledge about the state at t . But this is no general property. For this to occur, a whole set of conditions must be present and persistent, and the actors (for Boudon it is a question of explaining interactions) must be in a *closed* situation. Now this is not always the case: there are *open* situations in which the actor faces a set of options without a decisive reason for choosing one or the other. And there are situations in which certain actors can *innovate*. This *innovation* in turn may derive from a specific, private demand or may be brought about by the demands of a system; or again it may be entirely independent. Thus, for example – and I shall not go beyond a general indication – to know the determining weight of values (or ideas) in a process of change, it is always necessary to see them in terms of the structure of the process in question, which may or may not accept them as a *primum mobile*. The same goes for so-called materialistic explanations.

Following this cautious line of interpretation, Boudon draws attention to the need to refer explication not to the broad overriding processes of change, but to specific temporal and spatial elements, and to the need to pin them down within global structures, which may well have their own rules of change, although these will be less susceptible to explication in a strictly scientific sense.

This is the final point to which I want to draw your attention in this paper. It is that, although they are not testable for scientific validity after the neo-positivist manner, there are interpretations of change that even authors in the Kantian tradition, such as Boudon, accept as being interesting.

Boudon in fact distinguishes a logical progression which runs from the *enunciation of possibilities to conditional laws*, via the enunciation of *conjunctures* which may be more or less likely to happen. These conjunctures occur when a given state of possible affairs is more likely to happen than another state of affairs which is opposite to the first; for example, Tocqueville's (1952) formulation, quoted above, on the effects of liberalising an authoritarian order.

As to enunciations of possibilities or conditional laws, these fit more directly into Popper's logic, in the form of questions for which there are answers whose validity can be scientifically tested. One example of this type of scientific 'discovery' (similar in procedure to the logic of natural science) is Trevor-Roper's (1972) correction to Weber's thesis on the importance of the Protestant ethic to modern capitalism. Starting off with microsociological hypotheses, Trevor-Roper shows that the link between Calvinism and capitalism does not flow directly from the theory of predestination but from Erasmianism and from the fact that businessmen are the ones who have the best chance of adhering to the Calvinist ethic, rather than the other way round.

Furthermore, if there are Calvinists in the business world in Lutheran regions, it is because there were migrations. In other words, Trevor-Roper explains a more important set of facts than those Weber explains, and the facts Weber explains are contained in Trevor-Roper's. What is more, the microsociological facts explicated by Trevor-Roper are *comprehensible* in the Weberian sense, and are linked to the macrosociological facts placed in evidence by Weber. This shows that there has been an *accumulation* of knowledge.

Boudon concludes that, in order to belong to the 'scientific genus', the data for which an explanation is sought must belong to a well-defined set. 'This means that such theories can only be *local* and *partial*. . . Analysis of social change, therefore, is by no means a necessarily inexact science which by the nature of its object is destined to surrender itself to the incommunicable procedures of interpretation' (1984 : 207).

Moreover, Boudon goes on, a great number of theories of change are not empirical but formal. He exemplifies this with Hotelling's (1929) well-known article on stability in competition, and with Hirschman's (1981) reinterpretations of the same model for its application to politics. And the same is true of the well-known study by Parsons and Smelser (1956) on institutional change, showing that when dysfunction arises in a business organisation (or any other organisation, or even in a social system), it *can* be solved by creating new social roles and hence by differentiating roles. This type of formal explication says nothing at all about the *frequency* of functional differentiation, for example, or about its concreteness; it can be applied to a vast range of social processes. It is thus a 'formal theory', but not a theory in the proper sense, and it would be mistaken to apply it realistically in order to account for empirically observed phenomena unless complementary propositions and appropriate data were introduced.

Closing Remarks

Why have I made such a comprehensive summary of Boudon's work?

Not just because it provides a critical review of the epistemological status of sociology's contributions to theories of social change, but because it shows an openness to acceptance of a less 'scientific' view of sociology. Also because at the end – and now I can add this – Boudon highlights the 'spirit of adventure' of which sociological analyses are an example: room is left for indetermination and even for undemonstrable value judgements which glue together scattered pieces of explanations of change, constructed out of probability analyses, conjunctural analyses, formal analyses, empirical generalisations and even mere (and often rich) interpretations.

With this broad horizon, sociology does not lament its failed forecasts but enriches itself. It is unafraid to venture into fields where there may not be much scientific rigour but where it may be possible to find the propositions, not the dogmas, human anguish needs to break through into light and fresh air.

To return then to the main thread of my argument: as I showed in the first part of this exposition, there are new challenges facing those who wish to understand change in the contemporary world and there are new actors to face them – and I want to wind up by coming back to the challenges of the present, many of which are far from having been submitted to any of the exercises in explicative rigour which I mentioned in the second part of this exposition, which has now become a long one.

The first challenge, which is the basis for our contemporary feeling of a dying civilisation, is the menace of extermination of all life on the planet: fear of war and atomic catastrophe, perhaps more than sociologists believe, are at the core of a future theory of change. ‘Occidental’ or ‘Oriestern’ civilisation, which rebuilds the world, will have to change in order to respond to this challenge, or else it will reach the brink of extinction.

The second challenge refers precisely to the reformulation of the idea of ‘progress’. If the kernel of this idea is the possibility of a holocaust (and hence the very negation of ‘social progress’), there can be no surprise when such ‘progress’ is no longer seen as a guarantee of social change. Both Marxian versions of the ‘productive forces’ as the dynamo of history and ingenuous versions of theories of modernisation based on industrialism have to be criticised and fall into discredit. But this is no reason for adhering to Nisbet’s metaphysical pessimism. On the contrary, Third World countries above all continue to believe in economic growth, providing the theme of equality – among regions and among classes – tempers the pace of accumulation.

The third major challenge of contemporary change undoubtedly resides in a return to Montesquieu, or in a vision of modern anthropology which relativises cultural and civilisatory differences. There is no sense in an arrogant Occident and a humiliated Orient, or a pretentious North and a head-hanging South. Because of the real oneness of communication systems and the prosperity which the planet as a whole has already accumulated, it may be possible to envision an ‘Occidental’ or ‘Oriestern’ world, as I said above, in which cultural dimensions coexist, now interpenetratingly, now existing as optional pluralities. This is the richest of challenges for the construction of a theory of change which does not assume that the destination – for developing countries, the safe haven already found by the developed countries – can be known in advance. After all, the developed countries have not stopped developing, and, moreover, the changes which occur there are affected by the social processes occurring in the developing countries.

Finally, another grand value enhanced by the nineteenth century is still intact and can be solved by our own century: the question of equality. For changes to occur powerfully, it is not enough to have a dogma – a utopia is needed. The utopia for our own time, which is the end of a millennium, exists and is flagrantly obvious: the struggle to abolish poverty.

It is highly likely that these themes or challenges are not susceptible to rigorous scientific treatment, but as Boudon points out, without a pinch of subjectivism and unless the possibility is admitted that the unexpected can

happen, history can neither move forward nor be understood. These may not be strictly scientific themes. But they are indispensable if theories are to be not just exact, partial or well-grounded, but relevant and interesting as well.

Notes

- ¹ Boudon's *constat* is opposed to *postulat* in his words, because 'determinism is not a condition for knowledge, but a particular quality of the process in which presence or absence depends on the very structure of the process' (1984 : 192).

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