Module 3  Social Structure and Social Change

Lecture 13
Social Structure and Social Change: Basic Concepts

In this lecture, we shall discuss basic concepts of social structure and social change.

Structure

Structure refers to any recurring pattern of social behaviour; or, more specifically, to the ordered interrelationships between the different elements of a social system or society. Social structure is generally agreed to be one of the most important but also most elusive concepts in the social sciences (Sewell 1992). It is sometimes used rather loosely to refer to any observable ‘pattern’ in social activities, and empirical researchers, for example, have referred to statistical distributions of occupations and employment as disclosing the social structure of a society. More typically, however, it is seen as designating the actual arrangement of individuals and groups into those larger entities that Durkheim saw as social facts. The term, ‘structure’ originated as an application of ideas from biology, where the structure of an organism is the anatomical arrangement of its various organs. Social systems were seen as organized around ‘institutional’ arrangement of individuals that defined their actual relations to each other. Most expounded in structural functionalism, the institutions of a society are clusters of norms and meanings, drawn from the culture, that define the expectations that people hold about each other’s behaviour. It is through these expectations that specific roles and reciprocal role relationships are defined.

Social Structure

A social structure does not, however, consist only of such institutional connections. People act upon the institutionalized role expectations and so come into definite and recurrent relations with each other. Although there is rarely a perfect correspondence between institutionalized expectations and actual social relations, the term, ‘social structure’ designates this crucial combination of institutions and relations as constituting the ‘anatomy’ of a society. Social structure, then, comprises both ‘institutional structure’ and ‘relational structure’.

Unlike the structure of a building or an organism, a social structure is not directly visible. It is evidenced through observable movements and actions of individuals, but it cannot be reduced to these. The core institutional norms and meanings are cultural phenomena that exist only as shared ideas and representations in the minds of individuals. For this reason, socialization into a culture is central to the maintenance of a social structure.

The product of human agency, social structures express the fact that what people intend should never be confused with what results.

Premodern thought is basically structural in character. People act through social roles that determine their action, and great stress is laid upon executing a particular role according to the norms governing it. A male feudal lord is expected to act quite differently from, say, a female...
servant. These structures are seen as timeless, and are usually ascribed to the creative interventions of higher divinity.

With the onset of modernity – ushering in of the Industrial Revolution, emergence of modern science and critical thinking, such notions dramatically changed. People are presented as individuals who can choose which role they play and change from one role to another. Structures seemingly dissolve into agency, so that what matters is the will of individuals to alter the world in which they find themselves. The problem with this position is that not only is agency presented abstractly – that is, as outside society – but the same abstract force that enables some to be actors condemns others to passivity. Hence the classical liberals limited their notion of the individual to men who owned property, were Protestants (in the West) and upper castes (in India), and had the correct ethnicity. Timeless structures had not disappeared – they were merely assigned to others.

**Embodied structures** are found in the habits and skills that are inscribed in human bodies and minds and that allow them to produce, reproduce, and transform institutional structures and relational structures – norms, values, interests, procedures and social interaction.

The emphasis upon agency and the individual is important, but it needs to be linked dynamically and historically to the notion of structure. People became conscious actors not simply because they had changed their ideas, but because they acquired through the market the wealth that enabled them to command the services of others. They may have imagined that social structures simply affected others – women, the poor, backward castes, the residents of the colonies, and so forth. But this is an illusion. The market is itself a social structure and, as such, dictates to beneficiaries and victims alike how they are to conduct themselves. Social structures are the product of agency. Without conscious action, there would be no structures. But what makes a practice structural is that the patterning which results has implications and imposes constraints that correspond only imperfectly to the intentions of those who created them.

The structural argument that people enter social relations independent of their will cannot mean that these relations are the product of automats – creatures without intention and purpose. What it means is that the result of activities undertaken is never the same as the intention of those who undertook these activities; it is this gap between intention and consequence that creates the structural character of activity. It is not that these structures are brought about by the will of some higher power, but human activity in which intention and result hardly coincide.

Being aware of this makes it possible to try and organize our activities with greater consideration of their likely consequences. It is, however, a mistake to imagine that any society, no matter how enlightened and well regulated, can extinguish the gulf between intention and result, since the fallibility of humans and the complexity of social practices make it inevitable that agency and structure will remain distinct.
Social Change

Social change is one of the central research problems of sociology, where change is not seen as a mere succession of separate events but as a structured process in which it may be possible to identify a specific direction or tendency.

All societies recognize social change. Three important questions arise in the context of social change:

(a) Is this change natural and normal?
(b) What is the source of social change?
(c) What is the tempo – extent and intensity – of social change?

Premodern societies regard change as external and problematic. The way things have been done in the past is a powerful indicator as to how they should be done in the present, and this sense of continuity is understandable. To venerate others in the contemporary world, one needs to venerate their ancestors, since each of us is a product of the past – our parents and grandparents, and so on, physically and culturally produced us – and therefore disrespect to them is also disrespect for their progeny.

Such a position, despite its valid and valuable features, runs the risk of idealizing the past, and it leads to a paralyzing relativism (whatever happened in the past was good) and an authoritarian absolutism (in the past reflected a timeless truth that contemporary society foolishly disregards). It is important not to take these attitudes at face value, for veneration of the past is linked to the needs of the present, and traditionalists may distort the past in order to justify present practices. Change is seen as either the tragic disintegration of a golden age or at best a cyclical process.

In the middle of the 19th century, the first attempts at sociological analysis were prompted by the need to explain two great waves of change that were sweeping across Europe:

(i) Industrialization, and
(ii) Expansion of democracy and human rights in the wake of the American and French Revolutions.

Auguste Comte, in his theory of social dynamics, proposed that societies progressed through a series of predictable stages based on the development of human knowledge.

Herbert Spencer offered a theory of change that was evolutionary, based on population growth and structural differentiation.

Karl Marx contended that the most significant social changes were revolutionary in nature, and were brought about by the struggle for supremacy between economic classes.

In the 20th century, theories of social change proliferated and became more complex, without ever wholly transcending these early formulations. In the modern world we are aware that society is never static, and that social, political and cultural changes occur constantly. Change
may be initiated by governments, through legislative or executive action (for example, legislating for equal pay or declaring a war); by citizens organized in social movements (for example trade unionism, feminism); by diffusion from one culture to another (as in military conquest, migration, colonialism); or by the intended or unintended consequences of technology. Some of the most dramatic social changes in modern times have been initiated by such inventions as the motor car, antibiotics, television and computer. Change can also come through the impact of environmental factors such as drought, famine and international shifts in economic or political vicinity.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Social Change**

Sociologists have explored the question of change largely by the close analysis of particular change processes, and by refining definitions. Social change theories how encompass a very broad range of phenomena, including short-term and long-term, large-scale and small-scale changes, from the level of global society to the level of the family. Dramatic structural and economic changes such as occurred in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s are only one part of the field. Sociologists are also interested in changes that affect norms, values, behaviour, cultural meanings and social relationships.

One legacy of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, as refracted through the work of Emile Durkheim, is the theory of functionalism associated with the names of Talcott Parsons and Wilbert E. Moore. If society is viewed as a complex and interconnected pattern of functions, change can be explained as an epiphenomenon of the constant search for equilibrium (Marshall 2010). For example, mass unemployment may generate a welfare system, or radical conflict may generate legislative action. The ramifications of any particular social change are endless and unpredictable, but all can be understood as social adjustments to some failure or ‘dysfunction’ within the social organism.

A systematic **functional attempt** to specify the structural determinants of change can be found in the work of American sociologist Neil J. Smelser. In an empirical study of *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959), Smelser analyzed the interrelationship between the growth and organization of the cotton industry and the structure of the family, during the industrialization process in 19th-century England. In this early work, a model is proposed to explain the differentiation of social systems, based on an analysis of the way in which these two particular systems – cotton industry and the family – responded to forces for change. In his subsequent writings, for example *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (1963), Smelser both refined this model and applied it to a variety of types of collective action. He conceptualizes social change as a ‘value-added’ process, in which a number of conditions or stages are sequentially combined, before eventually producing a particular social change. This approach minimalizes, but does not wholly ignore, the more proximate causes of social change.

The **Marxist and conflict theory traditions** have developed along different lines, although they share important underlying assumptions with functionalism. The **Marxist theory of change** is more proactive, focusing on the ability of human beings to influence their own fates through political action. **Conflict theories** in general – not necessarily Marxist – explain social change as the outcome of a struggle for advantage between classes, races or other groups, rather than a
search for consensus. **Daniel Bell’s Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976)** provides an interesting turn to the conflict perspective by suggesting that change in the modern world arises out of the tension between three ‘realms’ of social reality which operate on different principles and move towards different goals: (i) the techno-economic structure (science, industry and the economy); (ii) the political system; and (iii) culture. 19th-century theorists saw change as a total, homogeneous process, where every aspect of society would change together. We now know that, as Bell’s model suggests, change is often uneven and partial.

Cultural lag is a commonly observed phenomenon, where the development of culture falls out of step with developments in technology, politics or economics.

The problems presented by the empirical study of social change are formidable. Historical data are invariably incomplete or biased, and long-term studies of ongoing change are expensive and difficult.

The 19th-century equation of change with progress is no longer widely accepted. Change may be regressive, or destructive, or confused by cultural lag. It remains an open question to what extent sociologists can explain or predict social change, and therefore to what extent societies can ever reliably initiate or control change in directions deemed socially desirable, or in any direction at all.

The modern age takes a much less holistic view of change. Change is seen as natural and necessary – something that is positive rather than negative. Each generation faces new and different challenges to those of the previous one, so that it seems implausible to imagine that continuity with the past is all-important. With the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, liberals begin to postulate a doctrine of progress – change is celebrated and admired. This doctrine of progress is contradicted by perfectionism, which ascribes animating change to a timeless creator, so that inevitably at some point in the future the perfect society will arrive. Some conservatives reject the notion of progress itself as though the idea is an inherently perfectionist one. It is important to subject the argument about progress to an internal critique: it is not that the notion of progress is problematic, but rather the idea that this progress has a beginning and an end – concepts which undermine the dynamism of change.

The conservative condemns change as a bad thing, the radical sees it as good, but each position betrays a numbing one-sidedness. Change to be meaningful must be expressed through continuity with the past so that newness can be critically appraised. Change must be tied to absolute as well as relative standpoints – do new ideas and practices help us govern our own lives in a more satisfactory fashion? The concepts of self-government and autonomy express a longstanding aspiration – inherent in all systems of morality – and they enable us to decide whether change is positive and developmental, or negative and self-destructive.

It is also important to tackle the question of the source of change. Why do societies change? It is perfectly true that people develop new ideas and attitudes – but why? The idealists treat ideas as autonomous agents with an origin in mystical genius – either of the outstanding individual or of a supernatural creator. Materialists rightly insist that change derives from forces outside the consciousness of people – that is, change occurs whether people like it or not.
The materialist argument is a powerful one, for it seeks to locate change in circumstances that operate structurally, that is, in collective “forces” that people can never wholly control. For example, the demand by women for socioeconomic as well as political equality arises not simply greater equality is a “good idea”. More and more women work outside the home and undertake occupations of a nontraditional kind. This breaks down patriarchal stereotypes, although it also provokes fundamentalist backlashes. The point is that, although the change is expressed in debate and argument, these new ideas (and new language) cannot simply be understood on their own terms. They seem plausible because they correspond to changing realities in society itself.

Then, what is the tempo – extent and intensity – of social change? Changes are always incremental in the sense that society is always evolving. In modern societies this change is built into structures so that it is seen as natural and normal: new practices; new institutions; new ideas. Is this change revolutionary or gradual in character? This is in a dualism that we need to overcome, for change is both. Each change is in a particular area, and affects the operation of a society as a whole. The development of the internet in contemporary society has enormous implications for other institutions and ideas – it affects psychology, ideology, the political system, industry, education and the media.

References


Questions

1. What is meant by ‘structure’?
2. What are the main elements of social structure?
3. What is embodied structure?
4. How is social change explained by Comte, Spencer and Marx?
5. Explain the functionalist perspective of social change.
6. How does conflict theory contribute to our understanding of social change?