

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Social Change

INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to deal with one big question: What happens to people's everyday relationships when there are significant changes in their society? These changes can be dramatic, such as a war or an invasion or the sudden collapse of a political social system, as in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. These changes can also be the result of the fears that accompany new terrorism threats or the anxieties that can follow a planned handover of a people's authority to a new governmental system (as in the transitions of Macao and Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland in the late 1990s). Changes can also be more subtle, but no less significant, such as when significant populations are on the move. Such a movement may impact significantly on both the migrating groups and their new host societies.

According to Lauer, "Social change is normal and continual, but in various directions, at various rates, and at multiple levels of social life" (Lauer, 1977, p. 6), and some argue that change may be one of the most constant parts of our environment (Segall et al., 1990). Yet, while every society is undoubtedly in some state of flux all the time, most of these changes are relatively small and gradual: There are no wars at home, little dramatic shift in political systems, and only small changes in migration patterns. What I will focus on for much of this book is the large and relatively rapid changes: the overnight overthrow of a government or the rapid collapse of a regime (such as in South Africa after apartheid), civil war, or an unexpected terrorist attack. Rapid changes such as these often leave substantial numbers of people with little opportunity to adapt their everyday lives, and this rapid change can be very stressful. Toffler (1970) famously coined the phrase "future

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

shock” when discussing multiple rapid changes. During such sudden transitions, important aspects of a society may shift, and these shifts can have important impacts on people’s everyday interactions with one another – be that at work, in the family, or when involved with leisure activities. Of course, not everyone is equally affected – indeed, one of the key themes of this book is that these changes have uneven effects on different groups of people. However, this book is about changes that have an impact on the daily lives of a large percentage of a population – not the twenty thousand civil servants who suffer a pay cut as a result of a policy shift but the twenty million who find that, overnight, their whole economic system has been replaced by one that is ideologically very different. Of key concern is the way in which people cope with an often confusing new world or lifestyle and how this impacts on their personal relationships.

DEFINING AND MEASURING SOCIAL CHANGE

The study of social change originated back to at least by the time of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle was fascinated by change and its relation to organic growth, and he was among the first to make a scientific study of change (Nisbet, 1969). Although the study of social change has formed a key mission for sociological research (Gillies & Edwards, 2005), defining social change has been far from easy (Berry, 1980). Indeed, social change has become rather a catchall term referring to just about anything in a state of flux.

Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth-century Arab scholar, stressed the historical method in understanding change and pointed to the multiple factors that needed to be accounted for to understand any change. These included the physical environment, the social structure, and the different personalities involved. Consistent with this, definitions of change have typically included alterations in social actions and interactions, human relationships, and attitudes (Lauer, 1977). Lauer himself defines social change as “alterations in social phenomena at various levels of human life from the individual to the global” (p. 4). Such levels range from individual attitudes and interactions to organisational, institutional, community, and societal changes and cultural, civilization, and global transitions. Boudon similarly refers to social change as an “inclusive concept that refers to alterations in social phenomena at various levels from the individual to the global” (Boudon, 1986, p. 112). Giddens (1989) notes that while

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Nature of Social Change

3

“there is a sense in which everything changes, all of the time” (p. 43), significant change means “modification of *basic institutions* during a specific period” (p. 45). This has to be set against a baseline of that which remains stable during this time. Some of the difficulties here are summarised by Etzioni and Etzioni (1964):

Social change ... may originate in any institutional area, bringing about changes in other areas, which in turn make for further adaptations in the initial sphere of change. Technological, economic, political, religious, ideological, demographic, and stratificational factors are all viewed as potentially independent variables which influence each other as well as the course of society (p. 7).

In practice, the ways in which social scientists have defined social change have closely reflected the methods they have used to study such change and the topics that have attracted their attention. Much sociological and political work has been very broad-brush, employing large-scale surveys. Such work has attempted to capture large historical phases (such as industrialisation) and, more recently, postindustrialisation (Gillies & Edwards, 2005). As studies of post-industrialisation have become more common, there has been a keen interest in the study of disintegration, a theme that I will return to several times in this book. Such work often had an interest in the state of alienation that such change precipitated and frequently an explicit interest in the development and actions of different social classes. Here the analysis has been primarily at the structural/institutional level; entire societies, or at least complete social classes, have been studied. More-microanalytic studies, such as the classic study of Young and Willmott (1957) of Bethnal Green in East London, have focused on everyday lives and interactions, while maintaining a strong interest in social class. In contrast, psychologists have been more interested in identifying and reacting to changes in terms of coping strategies, values, and beliefs, whether precipitated by events within or outside of society. In this book, I define social change as “any substantial shift in a political, economic, or social system. This may be identified through economic or political indicators, population movements, changes in legal statuses, or the widespread and rapid adoption of a new technology that significantly impacts on the everyday lives of large proportions of a population.” In this definition, the emphasis is on change from “above” rather than a slower evolution within a society. This is then separated from the *impact* of this change, which can occur at a number of levels, both societal and within the group or individual.

THEORIES OF CHANGE

When considering how social change influences relationships, it is useful first to consider how some of the major theorists of social change have approached the issue of social transformation. Identifying these perspectives allows us to understand some of the ideological viewpoints inherent in the research on social change that I will review throughout this book.

There are a number of different ways of classifying theories of social change. Berry (1980) distinguishes between accounts that separate sociocultural, institutional, and individual change and between change that is internal and that which is instigated from without. Boudon (1986) compares broad theories that consider general (and generally irreversible) trends with others that claim that if certain conditions allow (for example, industrialisation), something else will happen. An example of the latter is provided by Parsons (1966), who suggests that the family undergoes nucleation following industrialisation. For some, it is the *form* of the change that is important, whilst for others *causes* or *factors of change* are important, such as the psychological values that individuals hold that lead to particular social processes. We can also consider levels of abstraction (Is the whole society under consideration or just part of it?) and the degree of plasticity a theory permits human behaviour. Therefore, some theories are rather deterministic, allowing for only limited control over our action, although few completely limit a human's freedom of action. Other accounts permit individual variations and smaller group pressures to help act as determinants of action.

In the following review, I compare broad theories that point either to a simple developmental path or imply an evolution of societies to theories that are more cyclical in nature. I also consider functionalist theories (that generally emphasise a gradual process of change) to those that stress ideas and social psychological processes as drivers of change. Finally, I consider some of the factors that may lead people to resist change. This notion of *resilience* to change will reappear several times later in the book, as I consider how rapid social changes have impacted on communities, families, and individuals.

Development and Evolution

Developmental and evolutionary theories envisage a sense of progress and hold a linear view that tends to see only the most recent societies

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Nature of Social Change

5

as having achieved the highest level. Change is viewed as having four characteristics: It is natural, inevitable, and continuous and moves in a particular direction (Nisbet, 1969). Change is also seen as necessary, just as Darwin explains development following on from natural selection. Change can proceed from natural causes (such as in Herbert Spencer's theory of fixed stages; Spencer, 1897) or may follow contradictions within a society (in the works of Hegel or Marx). Whilst this notion of societal progression dates back to Aristotle, a concern with intellectual and cultural progress was a driving force behind the developmental theories of key thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Social evolutionists compare modernity with a more "primitive" and "traditional" way of life. They are often critical of the traditional mode of living, seeing it as marred by being hierarchical and trapped within its local and rural setting. For Spencer, societies are becoming more complex and increasingly coherent and heterogeneous: "up from the simple tribe, alike in all its part, to the civilized nation, full of structural and functional unalikehood" (1892, p. 585). Parsons (1966) similarly sees social evolution as a movement to increasingly complex social institutions. In his *Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, he divided history into an early "primitive" phase, succeeded by an "intermediate" phase, finally culminating in a "modern or industrialised" society. Comte, who coined the term "sociology," saw progress in societies occurring through reason. "The experience of the past proves ... that the progressive march of civilization follows a natural and unavoidable course" (1887, p. 555). This path moves from the theological (dominated by a belief in the supernatural) through a transitional metaphysical/juridical stage (which emphasises the role of nature) to a final scientific/positive phase. This scientific/positive stage is an ideal state, characterised by reasoning, where "observation dominates over imagination" (p. 573). Such ideal societies, of course, are usually modern and Western. Focusing on the institution of marriage, Westermarck (1922) sees marriage, too, as evolving from primitive promiscuity to group marriage, polygamy, polyandry, and finally monogamy.

Noticeably, however, not all theorists of societal development were so optimistic. In his theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Tönnies traced the development of society from a tradition-based, collective *Gemeinschaft* society, where folk life and culture persisted, to a freer and less traditional state of *Gesellschaft*. As with the other theorists

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

described above, this latter stage is marked by rational will and a development to a “civilized” state that is a linear and irreversible process (Tönnies, 1957). However, Tönnies is far less certain about the benefits of this change. Instead, he sees these developments as also encouraging alienation and atomisation, as the whole world becomes one anonymous city. Family life in particular is often negatively influenced by such change. In a similar vein, Durkheim (1951) suggested a two-stage theory of evolution of social change: from undifferentiated peoples who live in “mechanical solidarity” to a more differentiated society, where there are sharp divisions between societal members. This new society is less homogeneous and emphasises differences between peoples. This leads to a lack of integration of society demonstrated, famously, in his discussion of increased suicide rates. I will argue that this pessimism about societal atomisation is still evident in many contemporary theories of family change.

Closely related to evolutionary accounts of social change are those of geographic determinism. Huntingdon (1924) examined the rise and fall of civilisation, locating many of these changes in terms of the geographic differences between societies. The notion of change as environmentally driven can also be found in Steward’s *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (1955). From Steward’s perspective, cultural change results from adaptation to the environment – something he calls “cultural ecology.” As we will see, however, while such a theme is also present in modern-day cross-cultural psychological accounts of cultural differentiation (for example, in Van de Vliert, 2006), it has also gathered considerable criticism over the years. As LaPiere (1965) observes:

A verdant piece of land may afford human beings an opportunity to maintain thereon an agricultural society; but the existence of a verdant piece of land does not ensure its being inhabited or ... [that] it will be used for agriculture (p. 213). It is men ... who determine what uses they make of the environments that are offered to them (p. 214).

For such critics, particular restrictions in a physical environment may be important for some aspects of societal organisation, but the environment interacts with many other physical, biological, and demographic factors.

A competing account of progression was offered by Karl Marx. Famously, he claimed, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels, 1932, p. 9). For Marx,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Nature of Social Change

7

historical imperatives would lead to the development of class consciousness and the inevitable “victory of the proletariat” (p. 21). His is a theory of progress, even if this progress is not simple. Instead, there are a series of “dialectical conflicts” that will eventually lead to the liquidation of the exploiting class and the establishment of a classless society. Change is not evolutionary but revolutionary, with contradictions in society the key to these changes. Material conditions determine social and political life and, as a result, social relationships.

The notion that new technology leads directly to social changes can also be related to ideas of evolution and change. Economic theories of social change view technology as influencing economics, which then in turn can influence the family (Rothenbacher, 1998). Many have noted how transportation has affected the ways in which people communicate and meet with each other. For some, the invention of the steam engine and the development of roads and other transport systems have been seen as leading to a weakening in kinship ties (see, for example, Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1955). In his study of the Tanala of Madagascar, Linton (1939) claimed that the irrigation of crops meant that joint families no longer needed to irrigate the fields. The unavailability of land for wet rice cultivation led to mobility and the development of new villages, so that the joint families became scattered, only meeting for religious ceremonies or similar occasions. Another frequently cited example is that of the contraceptive pill. The introduction of this pill seemed to allow women a much greater control over their sexual behaviour, and it coincided with the much-touted “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and North America.

However, the impact of new technology is probably often overstated, and, as I will argue throughout this book, the exact effects of any technological changes are often hard to fathom. Changes in societies attributed to technological revolutions may come from a range of political and societal factors in a society that might only be partially related to technology. Technological change is frequently short-lived and may affect only some parts of the social system and some populations (LaPiere, 1965). As Giddens notes, technology does things only in the sense that human beings act on it; it does not drive social change without the actions of individuals. So, while information technology may be important in influencing the global economy, this has to be viewed alongside other social systems associated with capitalism and industrialisation (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Furthermore, particular

opinion leaders (important individuals, but also the news media and other sources of influence) may be crucial in technology take-up. Thus, the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s probably advanced sexual liberation, but it was only widely distributed within certain cultures. The same technology can lead to several outcomes and can be applied differently in different societies. Automobiles may take people out of a community, but they can also help people maintain otherwise distant social ties or allow for the development of new relationships that might otherwise have been impractical. The growth of less costly international airfares makes relationships between people living in geographically distant places economically more viable, but it can also make working apart from family members a more feasible option. Duffield, Gavin, and Scott (2004) studied close relationships initiated through internet dating. In their analysis of more than two hundred members of an internet UK dating site who met their partners online, it was face-to-face interaction – or the relatively “old” technology of the telephone – that was the key determinant of whether or not the couple continued to meet, not the simple use of internet technology.

A core assumption made in many of these ideas of societal development is that all societies are converging into one Western model. Many of these convergence theories are based on the premise that certain technical skills are demanded by an industrial world, and this leads to homogenisation (Giddens, 1989). Whilst such accounts can provide a useful explanation for some rapidly changing societies, they also allowed an intellectual elite to justify conflicts as inevitable and natural and failed to allow for a more complex cultural evolution that took a number of different paths. Instead, there may be different types of developments in different societies (Giddens, 1989). Because much of this is key to current debates about the ideal nature of relationships and how societal development has influenced them, I will discuss this further in my consideration of modernisation and Westernisation theories in the next chapter.

Cyclical Change and the Functionalist Perspective

Not all theorists see societies as on a progressive trend. For others, societies go through a series of ups and downs, often described in terms of life cycles (for example, Spengler, 1926). Such cyclical theories may be relatively optimistic (Toynbee & Caplan, 1972) or more

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Nature of Social Change

9

pessimistic (Spengler, 1926) about the standing of modern Western societies. Some of these approaches also embrace the notion of adaptation, which is also discussed by evolutionary theorists. For example, in general systems theory (Etzioni, 1968), social systems go through ongoing changes in order to meet individual needs. These then provide feedback that allows adaptation to the environment, permitting these systems to continuously change. In studying cultural phenomena, such as art forms and music, Sorokin (1998) noted how systems fluctuate between times of concern for the public good (which he termed “ideational”) and more selfish (or “sensate”) times, when individual welfare comes first. Whilst Sorokin describes a movement from the ideational of the Middle Ages towards the sensate and then the ideational again, different aspects of society may have different priorities at the same time. This reinforces the important observation that change can occur at different levels and in different ways within a single society (LaPiere, 1965).

The adaptive significance of change is stressed by the *structural functional theorists*. Functionalists try to understand problems of change processes in the context of a stable system. Theorists here see change as slow and societies as interrelated parts, with cause and effect having a reciprocal impact on one another. Change often occurs from within the group as is often resisted (Durkheim, 1982; Nisbet, 1969). In a similar vein, *systems theorists* see disturbance in any part of a system as leading to a strong desire for reassurance and equilibrium (Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1992). Functionalists frequently describe changes in the roles and functions of the family. The modernisation process is often seen as having led to a homogenisation of households, with each member having very different and clear functions (Rothenbacher, 1998). A large change in a family member’s occupational prospects following a major societal transition in society can certainly lead to problematic issues within the family regarding this individual’s legitimate position. This may lead to some reassignment of roles and duties. However, over time there is adaptation – what Parsons refers to as an evolutionary “upgrading.” Families may adapt by adopting “pseudo-kin” when faced with the need for additional workers to contribute to a family enterprise, a pattern often evident following migration (Lau, 1981). Similarly, technological changes may lead to some changes in family structures, but the family also adapts to these over time. For example, the introduction of power looms in the 1820s led to pressures on the traditional family labour pattern, as well

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84204-4 - Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition

Robin Goodwin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

as differentiation between work roles and other family functions. This produced widespread dissatisfaction that culminated in strikes and riots. However, new initiatives, such as the cooperative movement, and some flexibility in factory processes led to new family structures that were better able to deal with the new work patterns (Smelser, 1959).

Ideas and the Social Psychological Approach

For centuries, social scientists have been struggling with the problem of which came first: the economic system, which then led to changes in ideas, values, and political institutions, or particular political and cultural values, which then drove the economic system (Diez-Nicolas, 2003). Marxists, for example, argue that ideas are important, but material (economic) factors are ultimately more significant. In contrast, idealists emphasise the role of ideas, ideologies, or values in effecting change (Lauer, 1977). For example, ideological factors of culture and ideas can be seen as leading to behavioural changes, which then influence the family (Rothenbacher, 1998). Weber (1958) saw the development of capitalism as helped by a particular version of Protestant thought, which shaped the personalities of key entrepreneurs. Whilst Weber suggested a sense of cultural development (over time, societies tend to become more rational and coherent, similar to those theorists of progress I described above), different religious beliefs may lead to different social movements, with different outcomes in diverse cultures (Lauer, 1977). Although it is easy to exaggerate the tension, there are important differences between those who stress the importance of social structures in forming an individual's values and those who tend to emphasise the role of values in forming the social structure. My position is to agree with Boudon and to stress the interaction between the material and the ideal. In his words:

According to circumstances, values may or may not be a variable that it is important to take into account. Depending on the situation, they may be seen as primary or secondary, or it may be impossible to decide which they are (Boudon 1986, p. 182).

This view is taken by many contemporary psychologists studying social change who have striven to identify which individual characteristics can lead to, or result from, social change (for example, Georgas, Berry, Shaw, Christakopoulou, Mylonas, 1996). In a similar vein, Berry (1980) argues that particular psychological characteristics