



Social Change and the Future

15

Lecture Outline

After having read chapter 15, you will be able to

- compare and contrast five different interpretations of social change using examples.
- explain social change in Canada using its cod fishery and religion as examples.
- critically discuss how sociology as an academic discipline has to adapt to social change.

Chapter Summary

Society is continually changing. **Social change** involves the set of adjustments or adaptations made by a group of people in response to a dramatic change in at least one aspect of their lives. Social change has always occurred, globally and throughout history, and is a defining feature of contemporary society. Any instance of social change can be viewed and interpreted through multiple lenses. The five interpretations discussed in this chapter are modernism, conservatism, postmodernism, evolution, and fashion.

Modernism views society as advancing along a straight path. It holds that change brings progress and that what is modern or new will automatically be better than what it is replacing. Sociologist Auguste Comte, for example, saw positivism as an aspect of scientific modernism. Herbert Spencer's idea of "**survival of the fittest**," in which he applied Darwin's ideas to society arguing that societies naturally proceed from simple to complex and only the strongest triumph, is another good example of a modernist take on how the world works. This is also referred to as **social Darwinism**. Similarly, Lewis Henry Morgan argued societies progress through three distinct stages: **savagery, barbarism, civilization**. Today we see rather rapid changes, especially in the area of technology. Up to the mid-twentieth century, modernism entailed belief that science and technology would create a better world. However, Noam Chomsky has argued that modernism has a **narrow vision** stating that progress is not equally advantageous for all and that "whatever innovation benefits the dominant class is justifiable on the grounds of progress." Similarly, critics of modernism note that science and technology have created as many problems as they have solved, for example pollution, work, stress.

Conservatism, on the other hand, sees social change as potentially more destructive than constructive. This destructiveness is especially noticeable in emotionally charged areas of life, such as family,

gender roles, sexuality, and the environment. Conservatism is rooted in the belief that change is not always for the best and that in fact it is important to make sure some things, such as values, stay the same. An idea closely associated with conservatism is the **cycle of civilization**, the belief that civilizations rise and fall in a somewhat predictable sequence. Critics of conservatism note that conservatives are apt to use the **slippery-slope** argument. This logical fallacy occurs when one instance of social change is cited as evidence of the imminent collapse of the entire social order. Moreover, conservatism tends to project backwards an idealized picture of social life.

Postmodernism focuses on the validity of multiple perspectives and voices (polyvocality). This approach challenges the notion that researchers can speak for people whom they study without letting them have a voice. It further challenges the notion that anyone can talk of progress or decline across all societies. This model recognizes that change can benefit some while harming others. For example, so-called advances in computer technology are automatically viewed as good and beneficial, yet not everyone has access to them. The **digital divide**, for example, further separates different social classes in terms of access to increasingly important technology. Canadian futurist Arthur Kroker uses the term **virtual class** to describe those whose power and wealth are derived from making the world “virtual.”

Evolution is a model of social change in which change is seen as an adaptation to a set of particular circumstances. However, rather than presuming the survival of the fittest, this approach posits the “survival of the best fit.” Fluctuations in family structure and the number of children per family is a good example of adaptation to external environmental circumstances. While agricultural families, for example, need and therefore have more children, contemporary urban families tend to have fewer children.

The **fashion** model of change promotes change for its own sake and points out that change does not always reflect value change, improvement, or turn for the worse. Our changing attitudes toward tattoos are a good example.

Important social changes have occurred in Canada recently. Two examples are the decline of the cod fisheries in Newfoundland and Labrador and the growth in Islam as a Canadian religion. Both have had significant impacts on many aspects of social life in this country.

Sociology too, must change, adapt, and evolve. The discipline is facing some challenges, however, with formal membership in sociological organizations declining even while the number of faculty members in sociology is rising. One way that sociology can change is by getting better (modernism), staying true to its core principles (conservatism), being critical of society and becoming more inclusive of marginalized voices, for example by embracing Indigenous perspectives (postmodernism). Further, sociology must adapt to changing realities (evolution) and must go with the times (fashion).

Study Questions

1. What is social change? Which areas of life are influenced by social change?
2. What are the main tenets of each of the five interpretations of social change? Which approach do you agree with the most? Why?

3. How did Lewis Henry Morgan explain societal progress? How is his explanation useful for modernism?
4. In what ways do the collapse of the cod fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador and the emergence of Islam as a religion in Canada outline social change in the country?
5. What are the three ways that the virtual class, as theorized by Arthur Kroker, act as a class? Do you agree with Kroker? Use examples from your experience with the Internet to illustrate your answer.

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. Using one of the models of interpreting social change, explore how you would improve society. Outline all aspects involved in making society a better place (infrastructure, architecture, living conditions, and social constructs such as gender, class, age, “race,” and ethnicity). Gather all that you have learned from the text and use it to help provide Canada with a solution to change its social condition.

For suggestions on how to improve global conditions, visit Greenpeace’s website (www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/).

2. Video games have caused intense social and cultural reactions since their inception, reactions that designers are now hoping to change. Jane McGonigal’s TED Talk, “Gaming Can Make a Better World,” suggests that game designers are creating games that focus on saving the world and, in the process, creating gamers with “epic skills” who can save us all.

Watch the presentation at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM and answer the following questions: Do you agree or disagree with her arguments about gamers as virtuosos? Why or why not? Do you agree that video games can change the world? Explain.

Further Readings

Clément, D. (2008). *Canada’s Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937–82*. Vancouver, UBC Press.

This book looks at the history of social movements in Canada and their contribution to social change.

Narushima, M. (2004). A gaggle of raging grannies: the empowerment of older Canadian women through social activism. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 23(1): 23–42.

This article discusses social activism in relation to aging women in Canada.

Steenbergen, C. (2001). Feminism and young women: Alive and well and still kicking. *Canadian Woman Studies* 20/21(4/1): 6–14.

This short article examines feminism as a social movement and its relevance for young Canadian women.

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/>

This website provides resources on a range of policy areas, such as poverty, education, the criminal justice system, labour relations, etc.

Government of Canada, Status of Women Canada

<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/rc-cr/roycom/index-en.html>

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada was founded in 1967 in response to the women's rights movement.

Billy Crane Moves Away: https://www.nfb.ca/film/billy_crane_moves_away/

This short documentary tells the story of Billy Crane, who moves to Toronto to find work after the inshore fishery in Newfoundland is flailing.

We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice

https://www.nfb.ca/film/we_can_t_make_the_same_mistake_twice/

This documentary chronicles the long legal battle between the Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations and the Government of Canada. It explores the law as a vehicle for social change.