

Cyclical Theory

Cyclical Theory The cyclical theory of social change views change from a historical perspective. Societies arise, go through various stages of development, and then decline. Social change is the result of this natural tendency for societies to pass through stages of development. Cyclical theories are likely to gain popularity during periods of extreme social upheaval because people often view events as beyond their control. Cyclical theories are reassuring because they see change as part of a continuing process. German historian Oswald Spengler and Russian American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin are, perhaps, the most notable proponents of the cyclical theory of social change.

Spengler was deeply troubled by the brutality of World War I, which led him to question whether social change always results in progress. In his study *The Decline of the West*, Spengler suggested that all societies pass through four stages—childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. Western society, Spengler argued, had reached the prime of adulthood during the Enlightenment. By the early 1900s, it was well into the decline associated with old age. This process, he added, was inevitable. Like other great civilizations of the past, Western civilization was bound to decline and disappear.

Sorokin presented a different view, stating that all societies fluctuate between two extreme forms of culture. At one extreme are ideational cultures, in which truth and knowledge are sought through faith or religion. At the other extreme are sensate cultures, in which people seek knowledge through science. Ideational cultures are likely to be devoted to spiritual pursuits, and sensate cultures are likely to be practical and materialistic.

According to Sorokin, the tendency toward change is present at a society's birth. So, something in the society's structure causes it to swing back and forth between an ideational and a sensate culture. Sorokin referred to this natural tendency toward social change as the **principle of immanent change**.

Critics of cyclical theories point out that such explanations often describe what is rather than attempt to determine *why* things happen. From a sociological perspective, the interesting point is not that societies have a life cycle. The real point of interest is why some societies decline or disappear while others continue to grow and adapt to changing conditions. Studying the history of past civilizations might help answer this question.

Evolutionary Theory

Evolutionary Theory In contrast to cyclical theories, the **evolutionary theory** of social change views change as a process that moves in one direction—toward increasing complexity. As members of society attempt to adapt to social and physical conditions in their environment, they push the society forward in development. Each new adaptation serves as the basis for future adaptations. Thus, change is seen as an additive process.

Evolutionary theorists of the 1800s, such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Émile Durkheim believed that all societies progress through distinct stages of social development. Each stage is supposed to bring with it improved social conditions and increased societal complexity. These early theorists viewed Western civilization as the height of social development.

Critics of early evolutionary theory note that it had ideological bias—it justified the social and political conditions in Europe and the United States. Further, critics note that it did not attempt to explain *why* social change takes place. Instead, evolutionary theorists merely provided scattered data to support their view that all societies were traveling along the path toward *industrialization*.

Later evolutionary theory abandoned many of the ideas that its critics had challenged. For example, modern evolutionary theorists reject the idea of the linear progression of society toward some Western ideal. Rather, they hold that societies have a *tendency* to become more complex over time.

Change can result from many sources and can take many paths. Modern social evolutionists do not assume that change always produces progress nor that progress means the same thing in all societies.

Also unlike earlier theorists, modern evolutionary theorists attempt to explain *why* societies change. According to social scientists Gerhard and Jean Lenski, social evolution takes place because of changes in a society's economic base and its level of technology. Technological advances enable a society to change its subsistence strategy. As a result, the other social institutions of that society are changed to some degree. Each new level of technological development provides the basis for future changes.

Critics of modern evolutionary theory agree that it has avoided many of the problems that plagued earlier evolutionary theories; modern theories do provide a limited explanation of social change. However, they do not attempt to explain events such as wars or short-term changes within individual societies.

Equilibrium Theory

Equilibrium Theory As you know, functionalist theory focuses on the ways in which societies maintain order. Sociologist Talcott Parsons's **equilibrium theory** of social change recognized this. Parsons argued that a change in one part of the social system produces changes in all of the other parts of the system. According to functionalist theory, this phenomenon occurs because a social system, like a living organism, attempts to maintain stability. When stability is disrupted by change in one part of the system, the other parts of the system adjust to the degree needed to bring the system back into balance, or equilibrium. Although order has been restored, the new system is slightly different from the old system. Thus, social change takes place.

Critics of equilibrium theory note that it suffers from the same problems that face all functionalist theories. The emphasis on social order makes it difficult for equilibrium theory to explain widespread, violent social change, such as revolution. In addition, equilibrium theory tends to characterize societies as more stable than they really are.

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theorists, change results from conflicts between groups with opposing interests. In most cases, conflicts arise from disputes over access to power and wealth. Because conflict theorists view conflict as a natural condition in all societies, they see social change as inevitable.

Conflict theory is rooted in Karl Marx's ideas on class struggle, which he developed in the mid-1800s. Over the years, most conflict theorists have moved away from the emphasis on class. Rather, they take a much broader view, focusing on social conflict in general.

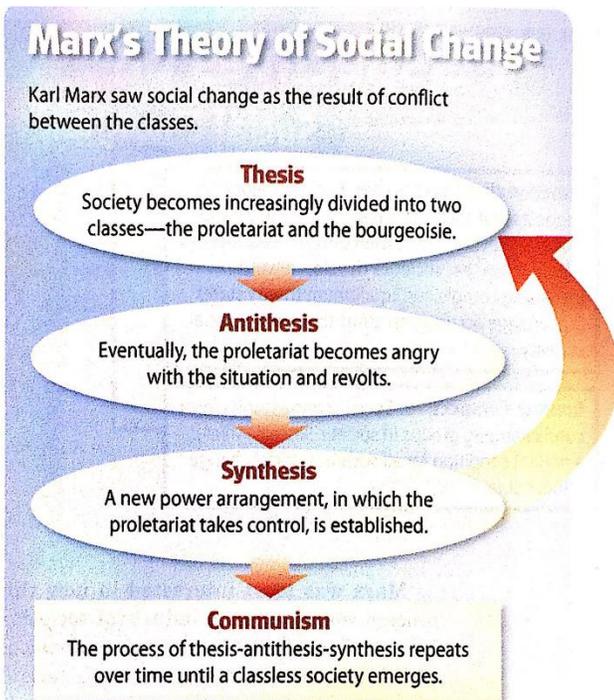
Marx and Class Conflict Karl Marx held that all of human history is the history of **class conflict**. By that he meant that all societies throughout history have been subject to conflicts between the people who have power and those who lack power. According to Marx, social change results from the efforts of the powerless to gain power. Usually, those efforts involve the violent overthrow of the people in power. Thus, Marx saw violence as a necessary part of social change.

Marx was most interested in how this process would occur in industrial societies. Marx believed that the sharp class divisions and social inequality that were characteristic of early industrial societies eventually would lead the proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie. After a revolution, a dictatorship of the proletariat would be established to assist in the transformation to communism—the classless society that Marx considered the ultimate goal of all social evolution.

Class conflict has not resulted in revolution in most modern industrial societies. As a result, most conflict theorists have abandoned Marx's emphasis on class conflict. Instead, they focus on a range of social factors that can produce conflict in societies. Ralf Dahrendorf's work is representative of this approach.

Dahrendorf and Social Conflict Ralf Dahrendorf, like all conflict theorists, agrees with Marx's belief that conflict is a central feature of all societies. However, he disagrees with Marx's idea that class conflict is the moving force in human history. Instead, Dahrendorf holds that social conflict can take many forms. Conflict between racial or ethnic groups, religious or political groups, men and women, and the young and the old all can lead to social change. Nor does Dahrendorf believe that revolution is the principal way in which conflicts are resolved. In many instances, interest groups are able to institute social change through compromise and adaptation.

Critics of modern conflict theory note that it suffers from the same problem that troubles equilibrium theory. It has too narrow an emphasis. By concentrating on conflict as the principal cause of social change, conflict theorists ignore changes that occur in the absence of conflict. For example, technological innovations generally do not arise in response to conflict. Nevertheless, they have a profound effect on society. In addition, conflict theory ignores those elements in society that serve to maintain the social order.



No single theory provides a full explanation of all aspects of social change. Given the complex nature of social change, it is very likely that no single theory could ever prove adequate. Therefore, many social scientists combine elements of the various theories in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the nature of social change.