

## 5. Change is Central to Sociology

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Change is a central problem for the discipline of sociology. It is often claimed that sociology originated as a discipline to comprehend the major changes that characterised modern society, especially those bequeathed by two revolutions: the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Sociology approaches the question of change at a number of different levels, and major theoretical traditions can be demarcated in terms of their conceptions of change, particularly with respect to their interpretations of the origins, agencies, scale, preconditions, consequences and potentials of change. As a discipline that is in dialogue with the present state of society, sociologists' thinking about change is affected by contemporary trends and developments. Sociologists have recently been very much concerned with whether the topic of their investigation has changed, particularly with the question of whether the global has replaced the national as the context of social relations. C Wright Mills once described the best work in sociology as establishing a connection between history and biography. The sociological imagination enables individuals to turn their personal experience of private troubles into public issues that are recognised as shared (Wright Mills 1959). Sociology accomplishes this reflection through disclosing general patterns in social relations and revealing connections between different dimensions of society.

Sociologists often think about change in a comparative and constructionist manner, since they seek to demonstrate that what is assumed to be natural and permanent is actually a product of historical processes and culturally specific practices. From this perspective, modern capitalist society is considered to be particularly dynamic and transformative; it incorporates elements of change in the processes of its reproduction, and supposedly renders earlier and less competitive methods of production and organisation obsolete. Sociologists have been concerned with the effects that the major institutions of modern society have on individuals and their living conditions—institutions like capitalism, the state, bureaucratic administration, industrialisation and modern cities. The major sociological theories of change generally contain some critical and diagnostic conception of modern life. Emile Durkheim proposed that a sense of normlessness or *anomie* was promoted in individuals by certain tendencies of modern society. Max Weber suggested that modern capitalism and industrialisation may lead to an 'iron cage' of unending accumulation and labour. Karl Marx contended that capitalist production was based on systematic exploitation and human alienation. And Georg Simmel pointed to the indifference

that individuals develop through their experience of life in large cities and the practices of quantification that are associated with the use of money. Important works of contemporary sociology continue the critical diagnostic approach to change, but there are also recent positive assessments of changes and their potentials. Manuel Castells, for instance, has drawn attention to how the use of social media and information technologies gives individuals the prior experience necessary to participate in new kinds of leaderless organisation. The experience of networked association is then translated into the practices of movements like those of the Arab Spring and the Occupy protests (Castells 2012).

Sociologists have equally been concerned with questioning notions of the inevitability of change. Sociological research has regularly demonstrated that change has been limited in major areas of social relations, especially those to do with longstanding inequalities. Sociologists quite often find discrepancies between the widespread social perceptions of changes in the circumstances of subordinated social groups and their actual conditions. For example, the overall remuneration of female labour compared to male labour has not changed as much as might be presumed from the enacting of equal pay legislation in Australia several decades ago. These kinds of discrepancies highlight the complexity of explaining change and the constraints upon changing enduring dimensions of society. Sociologists appreciate that it may be necessary to take into account how one change may facilitate or limit another—for example, there has been a substantial increase in part-time employment during the period since the legislation of equal pay for men and women. Sociologists are then very interested in how institutions and social structures, like class and patriarchy, are reproduced and limit change. It is impossible to address the question of change without engaging with some of the basic dilemmas of sociology. One of these dilemmas is the extent to which social institutions are the intended product of social action.

Before considering some basic dilemmas that shape sociological thinking about change, I will introduce the early sociological interpretations of change. Although the consolidation of sociology as a discipline disqualified many of the early speculative theories of social evolution, I suggest that their interest in long-term historical processes has contemporary relevance. Sociology undoubtedly contains a diversity of approaches to change, but the differences between them reflect the positions taken on some basic dilemmas. I then outline several particularly significant conundrums and emphasise the importance of how explanations of change seek to interrelate social action and social structure. After sketching these dilemmas, I overview the most important classical sociological theories of change and explain how Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx provided profound and contrasting conceptions of the dominant processes that shape modern societies. In 'Modernity and

modernities: Multiple and successive', I then examine how sociologists have sought to rethink the dynamics of social transformation and to understand the implications of the modernising of societies that historically held different cultural, especially religious, perspectives from those that shaped European modernity. It has already been noted how sociological investigations regularly generate empirical evidence of persisting inequalities. The section that follows is an excursus on some influential recent perspectives that qualify the notion of change and question the role that notions of change play in contemporary discourses. Although these critical standpoints are considered to be somewhat deficient, they importantly contribute to greater theoretical reflexivity. Indeed, the penultimate section, 'Contemporary sociological interpretations', highlights how the most novel current approaches to change respond to these qualifying perspectives, including through their exploration of the relationship between social critique and change. This section also sketches how interpretations of a new phase of modernity reframe the dilemma of the relationship between action and structure, considers the interpretations of social movements as initiators of change and sources of resistance to change, outlines several accounts of the paradoxical character of the social processes that are transforming contemporary societies and subjects' experiences, and notes the recent sociological concern with elucidating social creativity. Finally, the 'Conclusion' does not so much synthesise the various lines of analysis as underline how disagreements between them derive from different responses to some commonly shared assumptions.

## Early sociological images of change

The way that sociologists think about change has changed. Sociologists have largely left behind the interpretations of change that they inherited from nineteenth-century thought, specifically those notions derived from philosophies of history and theories of evolution. Nineteenth-century sociology and proto-sociology incorporated a strong sense of human progress and elaborated corresponding typologies of the evolutionary development of society, for example, suggesting that there has been a transition from more simple to complex social structures. In this way, these early sociologists sought to establish the direction or teleology of change. Borrowing from natural scientific thinking of the time, they considered that the evolution of society was a process of adaptation and early sociological theories were concerned with society as a whole, or a holistic system that combined and coordinated different institutions, like the family, law and production. Although the influence of the tradition of the philosophy of history may have been less pervasive upon nineteenth-century sociology, the assumption that the evolution of society belonged to a common history of the human species was derived from it. This justified thinking about change

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in universalistic terms. Despite European society being taken to be the most advanced and superior, the investigation into what Raewyn Connell describes as global difference, that is, the inquiring on a global scale into the diversity of societies and the multitude of practices, beliefs and organisation, gave rise to questions that remain relevant to sociological reflection on large-scale social development (Connell 1997, 2007). These questions include whether change is a linear sequence of development and what is the basis for comparing changes in societies that are at different levels of development.

The questions that early sociologists posed about change have not entirely disappeared. Rather, assumptions about the overall development of society and social evolution are probably still implicit in sociological analyses that are addressed to other topics, like gender and education, sexuality and consumption. Connell argues that in the early decades of the twentieth century the leading sociological theme of global difference came to be replaced by a concern with the problems internal to the urban Metropole. Major strands of sociological thought have subsequently been criticised for their alleged retreat from history and exclusive concern with present-day society. It has been recently suggested that in order to address the recent global financial crisis and its implications, it is necessary for sociology to renew its interest in long-term, large-scale historical processes (Calhoun 2011, Postone 2012). Independent of the financial crisis, this interest has been a defining feature of the recent work on multiple modernities and, as will be discussed later, this approach proposes that different civilisations constitute the cultural background to major changes, like political revolutions and the varying patterns of modernisation.

## **Basic dilemmas of sociological thinking about change**

Sociological conceptions of change reflect some of the basic dilemmas that confront the discipline. In my opinion, the notion that society is constituted through the actions of subjects is a basic supposition of sociological reasoning. At the same time, sociological analyses equally highlight the extent to which subjects are not autonomous and the persistence of social relations of domination that limit subjects' actions and capacities to enact change. From this latter perspective, society appears more like an objective reality that constrains subjects and is itself an independent force. This character of society is realised in various institutions or social systems, like those of the economy, the law, the family, the political order, and enduring structures, like those of class and

patriarchy. These institutions and systems pre-exist individual subjects and they appear to change of their own volition, that is, somewhat independently of the actions and interactions of subjects.

The global financial crisis may be a useful illustration of this apparent objectivity and externality of the social. The crisis involved the actions of individuals but it may have been conditioned to a greater extent by the structural problems of the global financial system, including the excessive expansion of unstable financial instruments, like derivatives and credit default swaps. Individuals participate in the financial system, yet their power to control this institution may be limited. Individuals are nevertheless significantly affected by the financial system's problems, such as through becoming unemployed as a result of the recession that follows from the financial crisis. The basic dilemma that sociology addresses recurs in the case of seeking to understand the potential of individuals either to transform the global financial system or to simply rectify its existing structural problems. Of course, there are many additional considerations that should be taken into account in a sociological analysis of the global financial crisis, including the position taken on the relationship between the state and the market in capitalist societies.

Karl Marx famously contributed one of the most lucid articulations of this basic dilemma of sociology, although any contemporary reiteration would alter its gendered formulation: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1977, 301; first published 1852).

The dichotomy that shapes this dilemma in sociology is often described as that between social action and social structure. It is a dichotomy that can be readily seen to converge with others, like that between the individual and society, or that between the small scale and large scale: micro and macro. For some sociologists, these distinctions do not exist, because, for example, they argue that the individual is always a social being and cannot be separated from society. To my mind, this is to draw the wrong conclusion from a valid contention about the social being of the individual. The problem contained in the dilemma of the double character of society is not limited to specifying the relevant dichotomy; it is equally that of explaining the connections and interpenetrations that exist between social action and social structure. The actions of individuals and groups are not independent of their structurally based social positions, such as those of class and gender. Action is contingent on the resources of wealth and power, or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, capital that is at their disposal (Bourdieu 1990). This means that there are significant differences in the ability of individuals to control and modify their life situations. Indeed, a good deal of sociological research is concerned with detailing how these differences manifest themselves

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in the interaction between individuals, for example, in terms of the differences in the degree of autonomy that individuals possess at work, or how differences in capital shape individuals' interaction with social institutions, such as in the case of the effects of class background on educational outcomes.

In developing a theory that seeks to reconcile social action and social structure, Anthony Giddens (1979, 1985) proposes that structure should be conceived as both constraining and enabling. Structure is, in his opinion, somewhat like language, because language makes possible the production of sentences and limits sentences to those consistent with its rules. Just as communication serves to reproduce language, Giddens argues that structure should be conceived as the medium and outcome of action. The class structure, for instance, shapes the actions of individuals at work or school and it is, in turn, reproduced by these actions. Leaving aside the question of whether this conceptualisation is satisfactory, it is intended to capture the dynamic features of social life and the modifications that can ensue from variations in social action. According to Giddens, social agency is the capacity to pursue different alternatives. This implies that certain dimensions of change depend on the knowledge, competence and abilities of subjects. In a number of works, Giddens argues that contemporary subjects' increasing reflexivity about their living conditions is deployed by them to reshape these conditions, for example, their knowledge about divorce rates comes to be incorporated into the practices of constructing intimate relationships (Giddens 1992).

The connection that Giddens draws between social structure and social action has been criticised by sociologists who consider that it is important to emphasise the difference between them. One of the arguments that these critics make is that structure and action can change independently of each other and that a change in one may not produce a change in the other. In concrete terms this means, for instance, that changes in the interaction between individuals in work contexts and the norms that inform action need not imply a corresponding change in the principles that organise the relationship between business organisations or the system of ownership of the economic system as a whole. The distinction that I have just sketched between different types and levels of social coordination is close to the distinction sociologists draw between social integration and system integration. For instance, the education system contributes to social integration through the socialising function of schooling and system integration through enabling the allocation of individuals to different positions in the division of labour. Now, these two functions may be complementary, but they involve different imperatives. Nevertheless, the discordance between social and system integration can become a precipitating condition for social change. Sociological analyses of some major contestations, like those of May 1968 in France and of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, have drawn attention to the underlying discontent and

alienation that resulted from the rising expectations of an increasingly educated youth and the actual limited opportunities in those societies at the time for either employment or rewarding work commensurate with qualifications.

## **Classical sociological conceptions of change**

How sociologists think about change has been indelibly influenced by the work of the founding figures of the discipline of sociology. The writings of the classical sociologists, particularly Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx, were deeply concerned with the problem of historical transition and understanding the profound difference between modern industrial capitalist society and all preceding forms of society. These classical sociologists contributed detailed accounts of substantial historical changes and a series of theoretical concepts to explain the processes and mechanisms of change. In each case, the conception of change exemplifies aspects of their methodological perspective and their more general image of society or social relations.

For Durkheim, sociological explanations should be distinctively concerned with the social or collective, because the social has emergent properties that transcend the combination of individuals. It is at the level of the social that Durkheim sought to explain the modern division of labour and its implications. He argued, after Herbert Spencer, that social differentiation was the key process that drove the change in the division of labour and that this produced significant and unprecedented institutional separations, such as between home and work (Durkheim 1984, first published 1893). However, Durkheim considered that individuals are integrated into society through their adherence to shared norms and beliefs. Consistent with the idea of a historical transition from simple to complex social structures, Durkheim contrasted the pre-modern form of social integration, 'mechanical solidarity', with the more dynamic modern form of integration, 'organic solidarity'. Mechanical solidarity is based on the similarity of the living conditions—work, family, consumption, education and so on—of the members of a community. By contrast, organic solidarity is based on the principle of cooperation across difference and it enables social cohesion in contexts of increasing social complexity. Durkheim believed that society is a moral entity and that excessive social differentiation can lead to breakdowns in the normative integration of individuals into society, something that he sought to illustrate through a study of suicide as a social phenomenon (Durkheim 1952, first published 1897).

There are several things worth noting about Durkheim's conception of change and these features are relevant to functionalist sociological explanations. Durkheim implies that crises and social breakdown can generate responses that restore the

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social order. In this way, change is modification. Durkheim's vision supported French Republicanism. He sought to show how individual autonomy is reconciled in modern societies with the overarching social structure. Social differentiation makes possible a greater concern with the realisation of individual potentiality, and the division of labour provides opportunities for individuals to pursue specialised interests. Although Durkheim sought to demonstrate the unique or *sui generis* character of the social, there is the problem of the notion of social differentiation's potential circularity. It seems to better describe the consequences of change than to explain its sources. In several of his works after *The division of labour in society* (1984, first published 1893), Durkheim developed themes that have preoccupied more recent sociological thinking. Notably, he sought to reveal the social basis of classification and cognitive categories, like time and space. In addition, he developed an interpretation of the social creation of meanings and values. In *The elementary forms of religious life* (1995, first published 1912), he suggested that rituals and ceremonies can generate intense experience of the social bond and that this *collective effervescence* has the power to transform the symbolic meaning of objects and things, for instance, making a sacred totem out of a previously profane object.

Max Weber contended that a historical approach is fundamental to sociology and he wrote extensively about diverse contexts of change. Weber argued that sociology is concerned with social action and the meanings that individuals attach to these actions. In his famous work *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1930, first published 1905), Weber sought to demonstrate how the 'salvation anxiety' that protestant theologies promoted influenced the capitalist spirit of continuous accumulation. The protestant ethic made the types of action that facilitate capitalist accumulation practically effective, specifically through the ascetic avoidance of unproductive consumption, the regulated and efficient use of time, and the constant reinvestment of the self and profits in the business enterprise. Besides its explanation of social institutions in terms of individual actions and their combination, several features of Weber's approach to change can be gleaned from his interpretation of the 'elective affinity' between the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Weber emphasises the significance of cultural meanings and values, since these provide action with motivations and purposes for change. Yet change is the product of the historical conjuncture and the interplay of various factors. The expansion of capitalism was an unintended outcome of the protestant anxiety over salvation and it is part of a broader tendency of rationalisation that occurred in various spheres of Western society (Weber 1958, originally 1917).

For Weber, change is always the result of a combination of ideal and material interests. It depends on the particular social and historical context whether social agents' ideal interests, in things like value commitments, religious beliefs



and reputation, prevail over material interests in the accumulation of wealth or subsistence. Weber showed how the interplay of factors, like ideal and material interests, the moral and the instrumental, are critically important to the historical institutionalisation of change. Weber spoke, for example, of the 'routinization of charisma' in the history of religious movements and the shift that this often entailed from a prophet's personal authority to the impersonal authority of the church. The latter represents an instance of bureaucratic rationalisation and a change in the conditions of legitimacy. Weber offered a railway metaphor to describe how 'world images', such as those of religions like Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, have 'like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interest' (Weber as quoted in Swedberg 1998, 134). The prevalence of rationality in modern Western societies, Weber argued, was related to the historical processes of the 'disenchantment of world', that is, the elimination of notions of the world as inhabited by spiritual forces and influenced by magical powers.

Weber's analysis of the religious and cultural background to modern capitalism has often been interpreted as a response to the materialist perspective of Marxism, and sociological thought has sustained its dialogue with the work of Karl Marx. The problem of change was not simply a matter of description and explanation for Marx; it was a question of developing a theory that could become an informant of struggles for changing society. Marx's conception of change is dialectical, but the dialectical method has several connotations. Probably owing to its original connection to the practice of dialogue, the dialectical approach to change is relational. Marx argued that historical change has been driven by the struggle between classes. Marx sought to show how class conflict is based in the interdependency between classes and the manner in which the dominant class reproduces itself through the exploitation of the labour of the subordinate class. Marx's dialectical approach emphasised how contradiction and negation are sources of major historical change. The contradictions of capitalist production were not just limited to the exploitation of the majority by a minority. Marx contended that eventually the forces of production—that is, the technology, labour and organisation of production—would come into conflict with the social relations of production, in other words, with the capitalist system of private ownership. Marx's dialectical approach is meant to convey the dynamic of change and how the negation of the capitalist social order is developing within it; for example, Marx claimed that increases in capitalist production entail an expansion of the working class and that the working class have an interest in abolishing the conditions of their subordination.

It should be clear already that Marx's conception of change places particular emphasis on production. On the one hand, Marx considered that the major episodes of transformation were changes in the modes of production, such as

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from feudalism to capitalism. On the other hand, Marx suggested that changes in the culture and other institutions of society, like the legal system and the political order, are conditioned by the system of production. Many of the details of Marx's arguments have been contested, but the link that he sought to develop between social conflict and change has been extended and revised. In some cases this has been done by treating conflicts other than those of class as being of equal or greater importance to change, as, for example, in the case of the arguments of feminist sociologists concerning gender or the Weber-influenced conflict sociology highlighting the relative independence of conflicts over social status and political authority. There is another noteworthy way in which Marxism has influenced sociological thinking about change. This derives from the need to explain the confounding of Marx's expectations. In other words, it is the question of why the working class has not pursued the revolutionary abolition of capitalism? It would be impossible here to briefly survey the variety of answers that have been given to this question, but Marxists have regularly drawn attention to role of ideology and the function of the state in order to explain the absence of change. For instance, it has been suggested that the ideologies of capitalist society, like the notion that reward is commensurate with individual achievement, have concealed the exploitation of labour and that the institution of the welfare state supported a class compromise by alleviating more extreme forms of inequality.

## **Modernity and modernities: Multiple and successive**

The writings of the classical sociological theorists laid the foundations for sociological approaches to modernity. Modernity represents not only a major change from the social order of the past, but also a constant tendency towards transformation in the present. In a sense, modernity is precisely the attempt to apply or realise this insight into the changing character of modern society. This is one reason why there is a strong connection between the ideal of autonomy and modernity. Modernity involves then a specific cultural outlook and a set of social institutions; it originated in Europe several centuries ago and has subsequently spread across the globe. Sociologists broadly agree that modernity concerns the relating of the present to the future but disagree over the probable changes and their consequences. Changes during the past few decades have compelled sociologists to revise elements of their interpretations of modernity, particularly changes like the modernisation of East Asian societies and the Iranian Revolution. It had previously been presumed that modernisation would lead all societies or nation states to share a common pattern of institutions and cultural values. In effect, change would lead to a

convergence in the form of modern societies and underpinning this assumption was the equating of modernising change with other notions, especially those of progress, rationalisation and development.

The perspective of multiple modernities commences from the questioning of the notion of historical convergence of modern societies. It emphasises instead the variations in the constitution of modernity due to the background cultural context and the historical period of modernisation. For example, China's recent modernisation occurred during a period when most European societies had already undergone several phases of industrial modernisation. For this perspective, modernity is considered to accentuate human agency and this is manifested in the mobilising of significant political and religious movements, such as nationalist, communist and fundamentalist movements. The multiple modernities perspective traces differing trajectories of modernisation and institutional configurations to the influence upon modernising initiatives of prior cultural meaning systems, especially religious, and preceding structures of political authority, such as the power of the centre compared to the periphery, the social complexion of elites, and judicial authority, all of which have resulted in kinds of path dependencies that effect change. These religious-cultural meaning systems generally have civilisational dimensions, owing to the scope of the world religious background and the internal variations of a common cultural framework, such as results from conflicts over theological authority and the formation of different religious denominations and sects. The world-images, to return to Weber's phrase, of different civilisations provide responses to profound questions, like the nature of authority, the basis of justice, the purpose of living, and the difference between immanence and transcendence. From these somewhat abstract considerations, the multiple modernities perspective has generated rich and complex historical sociologies of change, for instance, elucidating the connection between earlier antinomian strands of religion and more recent fundamentalist mobilisations, the manner in which the Soviet model of modernisation was conditioned by the synthesis between revolutionary movement and imperial background, and the variations within and between European and Asian capitalism (Arnason 1993, 1998, 2002, 2005; Eisenstadt 1999, 2000).

Peter Wagner (2012) suggests that the multiple modernities perspective's accentuation of the cultural programs of civilisations may obscure the extent to which moments of crisis and conflict result in radical breaks with prior cultural meanings and institutions. Wagner proposes instead the idea of successive modernities. He emphasises how shifts ensue from the changes in the rules and conventions of social practices, especially insofar as this relates to the application of knowledge to generic problems, like those of political power, economic allocation, and legitimate knowledge. Wagner (1994) argued

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that in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the early liberal phase of modernity gave way in the face of economic and political crises to another phase. Organised modernity entailed a greater degree of state coordination, the expansion of bureaucratic capitalist organisation, the development of social policy and mass consumption based on standardised production. In short, the successive phases of modernity result from the loss of legitimacy of formerly dominant understandings and the diffusion across major social institutions of another set of common principles and practical orientations, as well as the creation of new social organisations. Wagner claims that two broad notions have shaped modernity, those of liberty and discipline. Liberty and discipline form the points of reference for modern endeavours to modify society and to control processes of change. In part, the dynamic of modernity can be traced to the institutional and everyday practical attempts to make liberty and discipline mutually reinforcing and the changes that ensue from the persistent tension or conflict between autonomy and control.

Wagner argues that around 1970 the phase of organised modernity entered into crisis and it is in the process of being succeeded. The crisis of organised modernity is evident in its core framing dimensions of the state, the nation and class coming under challenge, the connected tendency for individuals to have a more differentiated relationship to collective categories, like class and citizenship, as well as a more general redefining of social identities, the emergence of post-Fordist discourses of deregulation and flexibility, and the questioning of social scientific knowledge's ability to predict and produce an accurate representation of the world. The notion of successive modernities does, nevertheless, imply significant continuity, and change remains a matter of the different institutional articulations of the core orienting notions of autonomy and control. Although Wagner's conception of the transition from organised to 'extended liberal modernity' is founded on several distinctive theoretical assumptions, the method of demarcating and contrasting the contemporary period and its types of dominant institutions with those of the preceding period is typical of sociological approaches to change. In fact, there has been a plethora of theoretical conceptions that have developed to explain similar empirical developments and that consider that the period roughly between the late 1960s and early 1980s marks a significant transition in Western capitalist societies. These conceptions of change often employ binaries like those between industrial and post-industrial society, simple modernisation (the original change from feudal–agrarian social structures to capitalist–industrial social structures) and reflexive modernisation (the modernising of already modern societies through science and technology, the extension of welfare rights to citizens, and the increase in female labour market participation, for example) (Beck 1992, Beck et al. 1994).

Before considering these conceptions in more detail and some recent modifications in sociological thinking about change, I will comment on a couple of rather different and much more sceptical sociological approaches to change. Significantly, the perspectives of multiple and successive modernities are sociological responses to notions of a movement beyond modernity and the postmodernist challenge to modernist conceptions of reason, progress, autonomy and subjectivity. Postmodernist questioning of these conceptions was influenced by the structuralist approach that had developed in linguistics and the extension of its method to disciplines like anthropology and sociology.

## Recent sociological qualifications of change

It is worth reflecting on some recent sociological arguments qualifying change, especially because approaches seeking to account for change sometimes developed in response to them. I have noted that empirical sociological enquiries into social inequalities have produced findings that qualify ideas about change and social mobility. Now, this kind of research can enable a more exacting understanding of the conditions of change, but for the most part it does not actually question the meaning of the category: 'change'. By contrast, neo-structuralist perspectives analyse change as a sign or cultural schema. Structuralism considers that the meaning of *change* derives from its position in a system of signs and its difference from, or negation of, other significations and categories, like the antonyms of stasis, permanence, or stability. This means that the category of change is open to the criticism of relying on questionable binaries and oppositions; for example, I distinguished changing modern societies from less dynamic traditional societies in order to introduce sociological perspectives on change. Michel Foucault claimed that modern discourses that espouse change, such as those of therapy and management, are modes of power that operate through a subject's internalising their meanings and by excluding other meanings (Foucault 1980a). The notion of unintended consequences is a feature of many sociological conceptions of change, but Foucault's historical genealogies show how movements for humane punishment, sexual liberation and liberties were themselves implicated in the extension of power and resulted in the more intensive disciplining of prisoners, the regulation of sexual identities, and the consolidation of governmentality (Foucault 1978, 1980b, 2003).

Bourdieu criticised structuralist analyses for subordinating the temporal dimension of social life, but he retained structuralism's relational approach to symbolic meaning. Bourdieu developed the relational conception in his empirical sociological studies of the dynamics of struggles over recognition in different fields of social life, including those of art, consumption, academia and education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu 1984, 1988). In these

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investigations, Bourdieu noted how the category of change is mobilised in conflicts and how it can serve both to legitimise and to undermine legitimacy. It is probably a banal, though nevertheless true, insight that individuals towards the top of a field or social hierarchy generally argue for either the preservation of the existing order or for managed change. However, social fields are arenas of struggles. Bourdieu suggested that groups contesting the current structure of a field seek to establish different principles and criteria as the basis for organising and evaluating practices in that field. Bourdieu's thesis is that the principles and criteria that individuals and groups promote are closely aligned with their social position, for example, those subordinated in a field due to factors like age, training, accreditation, and patronage may try to reclassify prevailing forms and label a musical style or literary genre 'old-fashioned'. Whether this contestation ultimately changes the field depends on many factors, but Bourdieu's main point is that the power to construct symbolic value is unevenly distributed and that this inequality limits change or influences the perception of the changes that are considered possible.

There are a number of reasons why Bourdieu's sociology constitutes a highly attenuated conception of change. First, it suggests that the category of change belongs to the struggle within the field and the competition between fields. There is no disinterested conception of change. Change is perceived and enacted relative to the position individuals occupy in social space, for example in terms of class distribution or the gender division of labour. Second, this means that what appears to be change may be just a matter of composition, since it might be the outcome of a struggle between different factions of the same group. It is in these terms that one may perceive how an agenda for change may be promoted by one segment of the bourgeoisie against another, such as financial capital in relation to manufacturing capital. Bourdieu tries to reveal the rules that are involved in the value placed on change, for instance, the value of change is downplayed in the tendency of the former members of the French aristocracy to either inherit furniture or buy antiques. In his late political interventions, Bourdieu criticised neoliberal globalisation and argued that the notion it perpetuated of the necessity of change is a myth that financial elites used to disempower opponents and resistance (Bourdieu 1998, 2001).

In my opinion, the criticism that Bourdieu privileges reproduction over change is largely correct, although it would be more valid to claim that Bourdieu aims to show the amount of effort that goes into sustaining social reproduction and that this can include aspects of change. The denial or veiling of effort is part of the logic of reproduction, because social legitimacy is regularly achieved by the perception of a person and practice as given, natural and normal. This includes everyday practices like speaking a certain way and eating certain kinds of foods. Bourdieu proposes that early socialisation has an enormous

bearing on later outcomes and this means that more effort may be involved in subordinate individuals' and groups' attempts to change their situation. On the one hand, this is because social position is manifested in the person's body (Bourdieu 1990b). Many embodied social practices may be quite resistant to conscious modification, yet represent the unrecognised components of social assessment. On the other hand, social actors have an intuitive understanding of probability in social life. Consequently, they are always making implicit assessments about what they can achieve and the amount of effort that would be involved in significant change. Sociology, in Bourdieu's opinion, 'unveils the *self-deception*, the collectively entertained and encouraged lying to oneself which, in every society, is at the foundation of the most sacred values and, therefore, of all social existence' (Bourdieu 1990a, 188).

## Contemporary sociological interpretations

It is impossible to survey the wealth of empirical sociological research into changes in specific dimensions of contemporary society, like the family, health, cities, law, sport, sexuality and so on. These dimensions of society have dynamics that are specific to them, especially in the cases of systems and fields that can be shown to have internal organising properties, like competition in markets and capital accumulation in the economic system. Dimensions of society, like the family and education, are equally transformed by broader general changes in society. The sources of changes that affect several dimensions of society are typically conveyed by categories that define the period's dominant tendencies, such as those of globalisation, neoliberalism, new capitalism, the consumer society, the risk society, and the information age. In the most innovative cases, the perceived changes in dominant social tendencies go together with modifications in theoretical explanation. Yet most sociological interpretations of dominant tendencies are based on some combination of the factors and considerations that have been noted. For example, Haferkamp and Smelser (1992, 2) claim that any theory of change must contain the three elements of 'structural determinants', 'mechanisms and processes', and 'direction and consequences'. Nevertheless, contemporary sociology contains important proposals regarding modifications in the constituents of these three elements and the relations between them.

Sociologists concerned with globalisation have questioned the adequacy of explanations of change that focus on endogenous developments in a nation-state. In their opinion, exogenous developments are increasingly important in determining changes in specific dimensions of society. For example, Saskia Sassen (2006) has shown how the disparities between Sydney and Melbourne in income and household property prices increased during the period after financial deregulation and with the growth in the global trade in currencies. In some

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cases, sociologists relate contemporary changes to practices and institutions that are perceived to now have a greater impact on social relations and social interaction, like digital media, information technologies, consumerism, and 'creative industries'. These are considered to generate change through either directly altering other dimensions of society or by the thinking and practices associated with them becoming paradigmatic. It is suggested that the organising principles of consumerism or the new media may infiltrate other dimensions of social relations, like education or politics, and come to reshape them. In my opinion, despite their sensitivity to novel innovations in the present, these approaches tend to confuse specific developments with general tendencies and they are consequently theoretically flawed and sometimes empirically deficient. For example, Richard Florida's thesis of the rise of the creative class and creative cities is a work of social science that has had considerable popular impact, but its analysis depends on stretching the category of creative occupations and exaggerating the significance of lifestyle considerations compared to other factors (Florida 2003; and see Murphy 2012). In my opinion, these kinds of approaches are more interesting as extrapolations about potential futures, and they can be considered to participate in what Alain Touraine (1977, 1981) terms the conflicts over *historicity*, that is, the conflicts over the construction of the future.

Touraine argues that social movements seek to realise cultural models that challenge those of capitalist business organisations and the technocratic versions of the state. For example, the ecological movement contests models of industrial development, and the peace movement presents an alternative conception of security. Social movements are, of course, directly concerned with the promotion of change and resistance to change. In recent sociology, there have been two particularly influential conceptions of how social movements seek to bring about change. The first conception is sometimes known as resource mobilisation theory and it is principally concerned with political contestation (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Jenkins 1983). It tends to focus on how social movements influence and transform political processes through mobilising resources and citizen participation. For this conception, contestation is provoked by inequalities and competing interests. These considerations are to a certain extent present in the second conception, but it differs in its greater accentuation of how social movements transform cultural meanings and social identities, for instance, feminists engaged in processes of consciousness-raising and argued that the 'personal is political'. This second conception, associated with theorists of new social movements like Touraine and Alberto Melucci (1996), considers that the changes promoted by social movements occur more in everyday life and civil society, that is, change is initially to some extent independent of the state, and social movements enable individuals to explore alternative ways of living. The state is then compelled to adapt to the cultural



transformation and the contestation over the cultural model it represents. The contrasting interpretations of how social movements generate change can be found in recent analyses of global social movements. Geoffrey Pleyers (2010), for instance, distinguishes between two strands of alter-globalisation: the 'way of reason', which seeks to present a superior political and economic rationality to that of existing globalisation; and the 'way of experience', which prioritises the experience of another reality to that of global capitalism through radical democratic participation and opportunities for creative self-expression (see also McDonald 2006).

One of the more recent ways in which change has been thought about in sociology is in terms of the disputes and justifications that take place in social life. This represents an interest in norms and values, but it focuses on their instantiation and practical application in social interaction, rather than on the antecedent socialisation. It implies that the social agency of individuals has greater latitude than is the case in sociologies that emphasise the structural constraints on action. The proposed model of change is based on a kind of pragmatic analysis, one that is 'capable of taking account of the ways in which people engage in action, their justifications, and the meaning they give to their actions' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 3). Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, the initiators of this pragmatist program, had previously collaborated with Bourdieu. Their book *On justification* is a departure from Bourdieu's critical sociology and the seminal text of this sociology of critical capacity (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Although it is based on different theoretical foundations, Michael Pusey's book *Economic rationalism in Canberra* might be considered an Australian sociological investigation into a change in the regime of justification and the implications of adoption of the principles of economic rationalism, or the neoliberal prioritising of the market (Pusey 1991).

Boltanski and Thévenot argue that a variety of formats of justification can be brought into play in contexts of social dispute. Drawing on the history of political philosophy, they identify several different grammars or 'regimes' of justification, which they term *polities*. These are polities because they each appeal to some image of the common good and each of them involves a specific kind of attribution of value. For example, rankings in an 'industrial polity' will be based on perceived professional abilities and the achievement of efficiencies, whereas in the 'inspired polity' justifications reference the grace of the spiritual figure or the inspiration of the artist. It is not difficult to perceive how this schema would draw attention to the importance of classification to disputes, such as whether the criteria of the 'domestic' or 'market' polity should be applied—or are being applied—to a situation, and how conflict ensues from the confrontation of one system of value with another. This is a perspective that is particularly relevant to clarifying how individuals change their actions,

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as well as how they may resist change, but its significance for thinking about change was probably only fully revealed in the book Boltanski later wrote with Eve Chiapello, *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

*The new spirit of capitalism* addresses questions that had originally been left outstanding but which are significant for the application of this approach to change: how do *polities* originate and become institutionalised at a societal level? The argument that Boltanski and Chiapello propose is that the new spirit of capitalism was consolidated in response to the contestation of the late 1960s and 1970s. It institutionalised a new polity or regime of justification: the *project* polity. Boltanski and Chiapello reveal the change in justification through an analysis of the changes in the discourse of managerial texts. The *project* polity refers to the network as the organising principle of social relations at work, rather than industrial capitalism's model of a more permanent and vertical structure. The network model is more flexible and transitory, social agents combine for the duration of a project and then move on to another project. In fact, the *project* polity incorporates, at least at the level of legitimating discourse, many of the qualities that had been opposed to capitalism during the preceding period of contestation, like those of self-organisation and horizontal structures. Boltanski and Chiapello are then able to show how the spirit of capitalism was modified in response to critique, especially the critique of industrial alienation that was inspired by artistic values like creativity and self-expression. In other words, this is an institutional change that is connected to changes in the grammar of justification. Indeed, it represents a way in which the tensions and contradictions of the capitalist social order were resituated and transformed, or as Boltanski and Chiapello term it, subjected to the processes of displacement. The critique of capitalism had the effect of dismantling some of capitalism's former legitimating justifications and the practices that corresponded to them, whilst the incorporating of certain elements of this critique in the new spirit of capitalism had as one of its effects the fracturing of some of the preceding period's industrial and political alignments. Further, the changes were not precisely those that the contestation derived from critique intended. The demand for flexibility acquired different connotation through its insertion in the grammar of the market and became used to justify the institution of more tenuous and insecure conditions of employment.

Sociological interpretations of contemporary change are not just concerned with the distinction of the present from the past but also the tendencies that are likely to shape the future development of society (see Browne 2005, 2008). As a result of the dissolution of notions of the convergence of modern societies and Marxist visions of a future transition from capitalism to socialism, perspectives on the future are more open to diverse possibilities and they are, at the same time, rather more circumspect. Yet modernity is still viewed as sustained by

its orientation towards future change, through science and technology's self-surpassing dynamics, the commitment to the new of modern art, and the everyday experiences of time as quantified and a resource. These dynamics of modernity are considered to be implicated in the dissolving of some of the constraints on individual agency in contemporary capitalist societies, as exemplified by Giddens' notions of the 'disembedding' of social relations and globalisation as 'action at a distance', Ulrich Beck's vision of the risk society and individualisation, and Zygmunt Bauman's conception of liquid modernity (Giddens 1990, Beck 1992, Bauman 2000, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Notions of the acceleration, contingency and uncertainty of contemporary social relations are typically connected with conceptions of the enhanced, or obligatory, individual agency in the present. That is, institutions like the welfare state and the family are considered to have changed in ways that foreground individual agency—for example, in contemporary capitalist societies, health and retirement are considered to be less simply states of being and more conditions that are amenable to shaping through individual choice and decision. Of course, these current developments are the result of longer term trends like the decline in the size of the family, the changes in divorce law, and the welfare state's institution of the social rights of citizenship.

At the same time, sociological interpretations of change in advanced capitalist societies tend to be fairly circumspect in their projections about the future. In my opinion, this is partly because of empirical changes that are counter to former visions of social progress, particularly the rising inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income over recent decades, the perception of increased insecurity in employment, along with paradoxically in the Australian context an increase in the average weekly working hours of full-time employees, political disaffection, distrust of institutions and ideological uncertainties, and the predicament of the ecological crisis (Browne 2005). For these and other reasons, the perceived increase in social agency does not necessarily represent an increase in individual autonomy and control over the sources of social change. Rather, the opposite appears the case. Sociological commentaries tend to highlight individuals' experiences of being affected by social processes that are outside their control and the sense that major institutions, especially the state, are less able to provide social protection to individuals against regressive social change (see Hage 2002, Pusey 2003). It was in terms of this kind of dilemma that I examined the question of whether there is a new nexus of change located in the tension between globalisation and democracy, one which overlays the dynamics of class conflict and reconfigures them (Browne 2002). Despite existing transnational institutions, like the European Union, arguably exacerbating the tension between globalisation and democracy, it remains an open question

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whether transnational institutions will modify this tension through processes of democratisation and lead to the institution of new dimensions of citizenship rights and the collective regulation of global markets (see Habermas 2001).

There is another noteworthy development in sociological thinking about contemporary change. It is the recognition of the significant social innovations that are taking place outside Europe and North America. In part, this recognition is a consequence of the uncertainty about the future in advanced capitalist societies and changes in the global order of international relations. Nevertheless, the perceived changes are not limited to those of political power and economic development. Rather, it is the recognition of the emergence of novel capacities for change and the experience in societies from the capitalist periphery of the necessity for changes that address historical injustices, particularly those deriving from colonial domination and previous authoritarian regimes. It has been suggested, for example, that Brazilian experiments in participatory democracy, like the initiation of 'participatory budgeting' and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, are social innovations of general significance and may represent the nucleus for new kinds of collective self-determination (see Santos 2005, Domingues 2012, Wagner 2012).

Although this sketch of contemporary sociological interpretations of change is admittedly selective, it is possible to perceive how the basic dilemma of the relationship of social structure and social action continues to shape debates within the discipline over change. Similarly, sociologists continue to explain changes through the elaboration of theoretical conceptions of the contemporary phase of modernity and its distinction from preceding forms or phases of modernity. These conceptions are generally based on interpretations of the alterations in modernity's dominant institutions. For instance, it is common to encounter arguments about how capitalism is being rendered resurgent, the sovereignty of the nation-state may be diminishing, and welfare state restructuring is generating, to use Barbara Misztal's term, the challenges of vulnerability (Misztal 2011). One of the ways in which recent sociological thinking about change may differ from earlier perspectives is in its greater appreciation of social creativity and the semantics of institutions. Social creativity is not only highlighted in relation to the practices of social movements and as a feature of the legitimating ideology of capitalism's new spirit, but it is also considered an important part of the mobilisation of collective identities and the genesis of meanings or values. The inconsistency between the self-representation of the social order and its institutional reality remains a significant source of social conflict and potential change.

## Conclusion

The discipline of sociology has produced a plethora of interpretations of change. This is not surprising insofar as sociology is concerned with modern social institutions and the dynamic character of social relations. Yet conceptions of change are highly contested in sociology. There are substantial disagreements over the relative importance of different dimensions of society, and sociology regularly demonstrates how social structures limit change in areas like wealth distribution, educational attainment and health outcomes. For similar reasons, sociologists often draw attention to the discrepancies between intended changes and actual outcomes, particularly because they disclose the effects that one part of society can have on another. Sociologists then take into account recurrent patterns and social complexity, but they are equally concerned with social actors' motivations and the meanings that change has for them. I have proposed that the way that sociologists think about change is generally shaped by their approach to the dilemma of the relationship between social action and social structure. The conception of the relationship of action and structure has normative, as well as analytical, implications. It can serve to clarify the socially instituted degree of human autonomy and human capabilities. In my opinion, sociological typologies of development and delineations of contemporary modernity's dominant tendencies have similar implications. These provide insights into the potential of unfolding change and the conditions that enable individual and collective autonomy.

The reflexivity about social life that sociological knowledge generates has the potential to shape change through informing social action. However, my analysis of contemporary perspectives disclosed a considerable uncertainty. Change is depicted as accelerating but its long-term consequences are thought to be either unknown or suffused with risk. Globalisation suggests an expansion of social interconnections but possibly at the cost of a decline in the ability to coordinate and control social processes. Modernity appears close to becoming a global condition, yet the similarities in social organisations and everyday practices do not mean that future changes will not be heavily conditioned by historically important differences in cultural orientations, political authority and social identities. Sociologists could be faulted for presuming that modern societies change, yet any reckoning of the differences between social conditions in the middle of the last century and the present reveals significant modifications in various spheres of social life, including those of family forms and intimate relations, employment patterns and work, political institutions and nation states, transport and communication. In some of these spheres, what seemed impossible has been realised and many former justifications of social oppression are no longer legitimate, but sociologists are now more reluctant than their predecessors to equate change with progress. No doubt this reluctance reflects how sociological

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interpretations are conditioned by empirical developments and the shifts in cultural understandings of concepts like change. Finally, sociologists continue to consider that individuals are to varying degrees capable of modifying aspects of their life-situations and identities but that major changes in social structures are conditioned by the strains, conflicts and contradictions of a social order.

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