

# STRATEGIC CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LEVEL. CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, BETWEEN “UNITY IN DIVERSITY” AND DISSOLUTION IN DIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *The change has existed in various forms in all stages of development of human society. We deal with it in all economic, social, cultural or other aspects, all of which have affected human existence. A complex phenomenon, which occurs on a longer or shorter period of time and which requires humans to be located in the center, through their own will, constituted into a veritable binder between cause and effect, old and new, nature and culture. Today the exchange of cultural information in the context of international system allows groups of people to interact generating complex changes, so it is essential to take into account the processes that could limit diversity in evolution. Similarly, due to the development of the cultural phenomenon increasing its social size, density and diversity, society will always be interested in the way every new element changes the human individual universe.*

**Key words:** *change, adaptation, culture, society, conflict*

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## 1. Introduction

The change has always had important effects at all levels. Whether it had to do with the economic, social, cultural or other aspects, all of these had an effect upon human existence. Facing the most diverse challenges, people considered to be obliged to accept the innovations made by other members of the community or, on the contrary, to be involved in them in order to create and promote them on his own in the in front of his own community.

From this perspective, the change becomes, at the same time, a process of giving up a series of values and the accumulation of others. A complex phenomenon, which occurs in a longer or shorter period of time and which requires humans to be located in the center, through their own will, constituted into a veritable binder between cause and effect, old and new, nature and culture. On the other hand, we can consider that, in terms of terminology, change and transformation can be considered as two different concepts because, although the relationship between them may be accepted as quasi-synonymic (at least contextual), this does not preclude a distinct semantic fields, and, thus, the existence of an element capable of conferring particularity to them.

This paper aims to analyze the social and cultural transformation process as a continuously evolving process in which the individual is involved and the way it changes through the mechanisms of social and cultural evolution. The research is based on comparing the effects that change develops, at synchronic and diachronic level, upon individuals from different cultural areas, the complexity of this change assuming a trans-disciplinary perspective in relation to the social and cultural theories.

## 2. Social and cultural theories of change

The theoretical basis of the work has been constituted especially by the classical evolutionary theories of social change, promoted in the second half of the nineteenth century by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner and Emile Durkheim, each these authors drawing attention to the complexity of the phenomenon. The interesting thing is that, although each of them brings his own contribution to the definition of the concept, this ultimately proves their theories to be closely related, and the essence of

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these theories – which withstands the test of time – is found in each of the assumptions recognized by the theorists that followed.

Firstly, the classical assumption stated that structural differentiation occurs consisted in the development of relatively specialized roles which are able to organize the flow of resources and social division of labor in all institutional spheres: technological, economic, political, religious and others.

Secondly, the classical approach accepted a relatively closed vision on the social system. It stressed that social division of labor manifests itself equally in different degrees of structural differentiation and the development of specialized roles and institutional spheres that organize the flow of resources. Classical perspective emphasizes the existence of these features and explains the dynamic nature of the institutional structure.

In the third place, this perspective supports the idea that we can maintain some criteria similar to those already engaged in the study of institutional differentiation that can be easy to apply, without essential changes, for a cultural sphere analysis.

In the fourth place, classical evolutionary perspective assumes that there is a natural tendency to the parallel development of differentiation in all spheres. Exceptions to this trend, such as partial or delayed differentiation, were generally regarded as unusual or problematic. Also the classic view reveals that the person (rather than corporate) represents the unit of analysis that evolves, that evolution takes place through natural selection and that it affects the social as well as for biological phenomenon.

This “golden age” of evolution ended almost immediately after the beginning of the twentieth century. In the following decades, their initiators were criticized by the followers as their vision was now considered outdated. Although evolutionary theories have not completely disappeared during this period, it should be noted that they haven’t presented the same interest as before. Moreover, the concepts were more related to anti-evolutionist currents and a simple comment on the vision that evolutionary theories had once proposed regarding the change could have “moreover harmed the area than bringing intellectual prestige” (Anderson, 1996). A return to the research of evolution occurred in the period before the Second World War, this issue being more than interesting in the context of globalization.

Today is rather necessary an emphasize on the new directions for the analysis of social change, in terms of more general approaches to the study of the construction of social order, especially given the importance attributed to international systems. But this kind of approach involves a review of the literature on the subject. In this review, is strongly required a critical perspective upon the assumption that that modern capitalist system worldwide is the most important determinant of the dynamics of all the contemporary international systems, especially as far as the dynamics of the capitalist system summarizes the one of all international systems of the world modern, being the embodiment of an international system that has a great influence over the individual.

Exchange of cultural information in this international system allows the groups of people to interact and to cooperate effectively, generating changes, so it is essential for us to take into account the existence of processes that could limit diversity. Today, individual may be in a position to get out of a small community, as he is put in a position to be found in different combinations of interaction and perception of a new socio-cultural environment, different types of impact certainly affecting his private universe.

### **3. Mechanisms of cultural change**

As we will see, neither cultural adaptation model nor the legitimacy class model can provide a sufficiently relevant image upon the concrete process following which social changes are reflected in specific episodes of cultural change. Even though many of the general theories are primarily concerned in the general evolutionary trends widely establish

a specific relationship between social complexity, the increase of economic capacity and the ideological aspect, but they do not provide an explanation for intervention processes by which these changes may influence culture.

In this sense, these approaches might serve more as comparative models at a general level, than as models for real processes of change. A predictable result would be issuing assumptions based on static comparisons, at a cross level. As elements to be investigated we can choose different levels of complexity or development of a single society or the comparison between the features of a single period, taking as landmarks several societies separated by long a distance in time.

But although these two approaches remain relevant for certain kinds of analysis, we must underline that it is likely to remain unspecified just how complex or development changes actually generate cultural change. Symptomatic for the lack of specificity of these social mechanisms is their tendency to resort to explanations based solely on assumptions about individual psychology. And even if psychological processes are involved, they can not substitute some more explicit considerations about their conditions of occurrence.

Marxist theory, in particular, points out that individuality itself - and therefore individual psychology - depends on the nature of the production process. If it is recognized that ideological change occurs primarily because of the change in the individual experience, should be kept in mind that this experience still remains a product related to certain social conditions. Specifically, that the individual experience takes place under conditions in which market relations and the "principle of rational mechanization" in relation to the "charge" phenomenon entered the society in such a way as we can talk about the emergence of a "atomized individual".

It also tends to be limited to those aspects of the ideology which refers to an individual self-perceived as an externally regulated commodity. This formulation of the legitimacy class model, permits us to say that individual experience can only provide a partial explanation for the process of cultural change. As far as the market relationship remains incomplete (subject to the non-contractual constraints) and the extent to which individuals operate as entities especially through the features which make them look alike others, ideology is shaped by other factors.

Subjective determination based solely on the experience of ideology, works only in very limited circumstances. Therefore, according to this version of the theory of legitimacy of class, social mechanisms, other than direct personal experience, must be taken into account if we refer to the real historical episodes of the cultural change.

An alternative to identify psychological states as intervention mechanisms able to connect societal and cultural change is the attempt to assert the existence of a connections in the simplest and the most "mechanic" possible way. This type of connection is focused on models of social evolution with widespread impact. These analyzes say that a kind of change leads to another, without even stressing how these changes occur or which are the effects of their production.

Durkheim, for example, is the one who supports deterministic relationship between social change and cultural development. "Civilization", he says, "is itself a necessary consequence of the changes that are produced in the volume and density of societies" (Durkheim, 1997). He suggests that the development of science and art produce a take place as a result of an impose necessity. Therefore, the progress of modern culture should not be attributed to people's values or desires. It should not even be understood in terms of attractiveness of a goal that people strive to achieve. Rather, we can say that cultural phenomenon evolves by increasing the size, density and social diversity.

Certainly most recent studies have raised objections against the extreme forms of sociological determinism, suggesting an opportunity to establish a dialectical relationship

between social and cultural changes. Therborn, for example, had a different perspective, which pays more attention to the process and competition (Therborn, 1980). More specifically, the author showed that ideologies develop in interaction with so called specific social conditions for a certain period of time. Outlining the importance of competition between different ideologies, he demonstrates that the results of these interactions depend on the specificity of each community where it occurs.

So, rather than pre-figuring a strictly ideological result associated either with the increasing of the social complexity or to the change of the class relations, the author says that we should take into account specific situations, which enable the development of new ideologies and the way how these ideologies influence one another. It is an approach that offers greater openness because, inevitably, it leads to a closer examination of the real processes and immediate conditions that determine widespread social changes and the specific episodes of cultural innovation.

#### **4. Variations in the frequency and degree of cultural change**

A careful reading of the observations on cultural change issued by theorists like Marx, Durkheim, Weber, or later, such as those of Parsons (Lidz, 2005) and Mannheim (Kettler, Volker, 1995), reveals a different and persistent kind of ambiguity: although some attention is devoted to specific episodes of notable change in cultural systems - such as Enlightenment or increasing of the Socialism - theories still tend to give the impression that cultural change must be developed gradually, linearly and mostly continuously.

In more recent work, the authors felt the need for theoretical explanations for certain transformations in the frequency and timing of cultural changes. If cultural changes are simply perceived as elementary, then only the most general of their sources are taken any interest. In any case, this problem occurs because of ambiguities regarding the appropriate level of generality at which cultural change is examined.

If culture is perceived rather as the sum of the most general models or guidelines more that underlie social behavior than as a symbolic expression, in this case attention is drawn inevitably, by the predominant forms more rather than particular aspects of cultural change. Thus, Weber identified the streamlining as the general trend which underpins the development of modern culture, tending to locate throughout the West: in law, music, economic relations, scientific bureaucracy, museums, religion, state, or military organization.

Given this, it becomes useless, in a sense, to investigate any of its particular manifestations. An example of rationalization simply reinforces another. At this level of generality, every manifestation of cultural change ceases to be important by itself. Rather, it becomes significant only as an indication that some deeper processes are not yet finalized. Understanding the origins of an episode becomes less interesting than his interpretation facing a more consistent one.

Analyzing Weber's contribution to sociology of music, for example, Habermas suggests that it is less important to know where the music comes from or how rational structures were institutionalized than to admit that this development was a sign of a more pronounced differentiation between autonomous cultural spheres, which came from the differentiation between aesthetic and technical levels, as well as differentiation in the degree of growth of theoretical and practical elements (Habermas, 1984).

This type of argument leads of course to the development of an interpretative style of social science, which deals with the discovery of the meaning of events, rather than seeking to explain their sources. However, in order to understand such an approach, involves mainly to have an a priori conception of the dominant trends of modern culture (an example is the concept of differentiation). With this concept in mind, the researcher just needs to find cultural change situations that seem to fit the general picture. But the

process of which cultural change occurs and then becomes institutionalized, remains unidirectional. This trend is halfway between purely theoretical approaches and the ones rather empirical or historical. Thus, the efforts to link these general perspectives of specific historical cases, although numerous, were considered less than satisfactory.

Two examples illustrate this assertion. Although, as we pointed out, the Enlightenment is often considered a key instance of cultural change, came as a response to changing needs for class legitimating, one of the most recent - and most extensive analysis of the Enlightenment - rejects, directly, the idea that cultural change in this period would have been, in any way, related to the rise of the bourgeoisie and its needs to gain legitimacy class. A new vision of the future certainly emerged, the authors say, but its apostles must be looked for, in any case, among the nobility - whether it's those of noble origin, whether we refer to those who have used the economical factor to enter this elite class. Thus, the first people who tried to "translate" ideas into practice were enlightened government members and most of them were nobles.

Behrens continues to assert that commercial and industrial wealth is no more than a small part of the economy of the eighteenth century, that nobility and the bourgeoisie were very hard to distinct in the sources of their wealth, and that nobility did not suffered any form of decline, either relative or absolute (Behrens, 1985). Of course that the veracity of the evidence that author brings or his understanding of the theoretical perspective can certainly be questioned. The increasing of the socialism may also be an example. Of all the changes in the modern culture, this development seems to have created, perhaps ironically, the most difficult problems to explain, especially for class legitimating model. These problems can be partially attributed to the fact that some of the theoretical formulations of this tradition are themselves associated with the increasing of the socialism.

But other issues also arise, as obvious facts. In the simplest sense, the class legitimating model connects the emergence of the socialism to the one of the proletariat as a new class who needed legitimacy. Of course, there were theorists who searched more complicated versions and, therefore, who were not satisfied with this explanation. Wanting to keep the importance of socialist ideology as a precursor of the proletarian struggle, these arguments have taken a different view. Lukács (Lukács, 1971), for example, writes that "nothing has changed in the objective situation" and that only "its perspective has changed". Of course that this kind of argument can undermine the power base of the class legitimating model.

However, no matter which of the approaches seems sufficiently eloquent to us, the important thing remains our capacity to establish a relationship between social, economic and cultural changes, because this seems the only way cultural system itself appears more grounded in existence of the community.

### **5. Instead of conclusions: XXI century - between adaptation and confrontation**

Returning to the key concept of our analysis, we should underline that the change has existed, in various forms, in all stages of development of the human society. As we noted, the change is an important phenomenon for the human evolution. First of all because it requires accepting the fact that at least one of the elements that surround it can be either transformed or replaced with another. Of course this acceptance is especially important in itself because the individual reconfirms its position in society through a double action: on the one hand, he redefines himself from a position of superiority in relation to non-animated objects that surround him, and, on the other hand, he reaffirms his interest in them, giving them a well-defined place in his life. On the other hand, we are dealing with an attitude of giving up: the individual gives up those things that, at one point, are perceived as obsolete, outdated and, in time, even questionable in terms of usefulness. Of

course, at this point, we must distinguish between what can be changed - either transformed or replaced - and what keeps the status quo of human beings as it is and appears, at least at some point, irreplaceable, joined through an inalienable relationship. Any disposition of this pattern may draw serious implications in order to disrupt the entire universe of the human mind, whether regarded as inimitable individuality or as a social being.

Either way, the change is the one that sometimes pushes individuals to abandon their values, to imitate or follow a model that they, indirectly, admit to be superior. From this point of view, we can say that there are equally advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the individual has the opportunity to educate his inner sense of measure, which leads him to self-censorship in relation to a benchmark, makes him take out what he considers good and give up what he appreciates as bad in his own universe - be it material or spiritual. The result is exactly the adaptation to what he perceives as a new evolving environment. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that any departure from this equilibrium position determines the adoption of some outside inferior models - from the point of quality - attitude that is accompanied by giving up some of the homonymous elements that he already had in his universe, whose superiority can not perceive any more. In this case, we are dealing with an individual exposed to excessive influences and who may not be able to select between his self-interest of accumulation imperishable values and a simple step that brings one or another model to his attention, even if the latter does not stand the test of time.

Thus, while the concepts associated to the change seem to become even more present in today's society than the elements from the quo sphere status, we may wonder how easy it is to change the mentality of a community. Analyzing these phenomena, Samuel Huntington speaks of the "Clash of Civilizations and Restore of the World Order". A book in which we can observe the use of some key concepts essential for what this society has become today. On the one hand, we deal with clash, conflict, disagreement or tension, and on the other - order, civilization or culture. It is interesting to note that, beyond the research perspective, the author seems to question to what extent the confrontation - whatever form it may appear - becomes an exclusive feature of today's society. The issue is even more interesting in itself than the answer to the question, especially since it gave rise to a scientific polemic able to bring these elements in attention. Beyond being a feature of today's era, the confrontation is, first of all, a constant. This item becomes a binder rather than a distinctive feature compared to previous periods, the elements which distinguish it being, in our opinion, the form, the degree and the intensity that it takes each time.

Whether this incentive to introduce an element of novelty in the daily life materializes at the right time or not, the approach is usually caused by the existence of the influence that we feel, more and more, from some of the models. Sometimes, these are promoted by intellectuals, elites, and originally imposed in an isolated space; the atmosphere of an "art club" or modernized agora, often taking as reference the university as an institution that can generate creative enthusiasm. Some other times, models are promoted by advertising, which has the ability to create it. Finished product which needs to be marketed and that produces more and more attractiveness to the public - reaching to a narcotic the effect - is the illusion that perfection can be part of everyday life. Color images, more or less reliable characters, well-chosen sounds, all of these elements bear subliminal messages, able to transform mere spectator in a potential buyer.

The interesting thing is that, although the strategy became known to the public - that began to recognize patterns or even elements of manipulation - it seems to be addictive. The reason is simple: everyone wants to feel that problems can be magically solved; everyone wants to believe that he/she deserves more than one can afford and, above all,

every spectator is willing to recognize his/her own story in whatever he / she sees on the screen. And, if the distance between a common individual, full of overwhelmed by problems and effort and a the veritable hero – the perfect character on the screen - can be canceled by simply purchasing a product, we need not wonder why, nowadays, it has become so easy for the advertising specialist to stimulate the acquisitive behavior. We note that, between the two models, the latter seems to be more influential in today's society. Intellectuals, isolated in their own universe, can not compare to a "fashionable" phantasm. It seems that the modern man doesn't want to look like the one who advised him to seek depth any longer. On the contrary, sick of any kind of effort, he wants to quickly find an image of perfection, even a superficial one, if it is reachable at an affordable price. This explains why public people especially promoted by television as VIP, will not attract the public through the sharpness of their mind, but through the impression a "flawless package" may produce, as a possible guarantee for peaceful and comfortable material life.

The problem occurs when, in an effort to take over, whole or partial, the message of these models, it produces a change in mentality. The appearance is really disturbing when creating individual and social imbalances. It is the case Samuel Huntington quoted when he analyzes the developing of the power relationship (Huntington, 2002). The author speaks again about the clash of civilizations, based on the idea that even concretization of power provokes a conflict, be it latent, by accumulating the tension resulting from the increase of the influence of one force and decrease of the influence of the other. The result is exactly the imbalance we have mentioned previously, especially when two powers "collide" as Huntington says. The result is beyond a simple system of international relations. It is related to the specific conservation spirit, resulted in the different response of each of the two parties. On the one hand, we see a possible alliance against a virtual hegemonic power, especially if it is perceived as a threat. On the other hand, these alliances can symbolize the recognition of the influence of that power, especially if other states begin to join, thereby seeking to identify, partially, with the image of the winner.

Thus we can illustrate even better the well known slogan of the European Union - Unity in Diversity. This is a proof that even today's society, placed under the sign of diversity, tries to learn to accept its own weaknesses and, in the same time, to recognize the strengths of others. Moreover, it is a model for the evolution of international relations, especially that civilization, seen as a moment in time, as one step in an evolutionary process, reflects, as Huntington says the whole history of mankind, giving a real sense to the concept of diversity. This is why we can now say that we are witnessing a continuous paradox: on the one hand, nations affirm desire to retain their identity; on the other hand, we are talking about their desire to integrate into an international organization, which may give them the impression of security.

In conclusion, the process of change has multiple significances from one stage to another. The successive replacement of a model to another can be a reason for a situation in which, nowadays, people find it hard to discover their own identity. This is why, after having abandoned the models and the values that they considered to be outdated in favor of more fashionable one, they understand, in fact, that the true impact is given within one's own spiritual universe, which will urge them, at a time, to ask for and promote their inner symbolic universe, the only one which provides stability and individuality, even in a world attracted by illusion and commercial aspects.

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