

EVOLUTIONARY MODEL OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

Anthony Giddens, one of the forerunner among the anti-evolutionists in sociology today, has made a special point of criticizing evolutionary theories for their lack of any concept of human agency, which for Giddens completely invalidates any social theory. Theories of social evolution have incited two kinds of critiques; one radical, and the other moderate. Radical critics of the theory of social evolution raise methodological issues with the theory of social evolution. They argue that social change cannot be understood through evolutionary theory, therefore the latter is not needed. Moderate criticism differs from radical criticism because it seeks to separate the concept of evolution from that of progress. According to this position, the idea of social progress must be rejected, but the evolutionary approach should be preserved. This article will look into the conceptual terrain of evolutionism and pattern of ebb and flow in it.

Keywords: Evolutionists, diffusion, endogenous, exogenous, mechanical and organic solidarity.



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Evolutionary theory of social change: An Introduction

Permanence of human society is an illusion. Human society is in an ever-changing process, growing, decaying, renewing and adjusting itself to new-found ideas, inventions and ways of living. The word 'change' immediately brings to mind something different from yesterday or past. Change is the irrefutable law of nature. It may be or may not be visible but all things are changing at varying paces. There are changes in physical environment, flora and fauna, water table, so on and so forth. Similarly, social environment which has been created by human beings themselves is continuously in the process of change. A look into the history of society reveals that all social institutions such as family, religion, marriage, political, economic, social

values and social attitudes have undergone a drastic change over a period of time. The social life being lived by human being at present during the dawn of 21st century was not so about hundred or more years back.

The concept of social change was introduced by August Comte, a Frenchman, known as founding father of Sociology. Later on, the concept of social change was further refined and developed by Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx and a number of other sociologists. No human society is static and at the same time it is difficult to predict the forms and directions of social change. The reason is that the factors which cause social change do not remain uniform always. The population changes, expansion of science and technology, ideologies and social values take on new forms, and as a result of that social structure, social system, and social institutions change their functioning. The process of industrialization and urbanization has changed the whole set of social relationships. It is quite visible that the contemporary world is not changing uniformly and is also manifesting complexities in social change. Slow and simple forms of social change may intersect with quick and intricate forms of social change. Migration of illiterate persons from remote rural areas to metropolitan cities will effect the institutions of family life in it, add to stress and strain of daily living due to fast pace of city life and new social values required for industrial and urban living.

Evolutionary theories of social change have made a prominent place in the history of social sciences. Albeit, there are many evolutionary models of social change, but the essential element is that they hold something in common, which is their assumption that history is more than a series of particular and unique events. Instead of that, evolutionists hold that history reveal a certain uniformity and directionality in the sense that there are similar processes happening at several times, at various points throughout the globe.

The social sciences (Sociology and Anthropology in particular) have from the very beginning enjoyed alternating periods of cordial-hateful relationship with evolutionary theories of social change. During the second half of 19th century we have witnessed a tremendous cordial relationship between evolutionary theories and social sciences (especially among Anthropology and Sociology, which were the new entrants in the domain of social sciences). Most of the adventures made by sociologists and anthropologists were evolutionary in character. Lewis Henry Morgan and E B Tylor were the two prominent anthropologists who believed more in evolutionary model of social change. In a similar fashion, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spenser and Emile Durkheim were prominent sociologists among many who believed

in evolutionary model of social change. For instance, the efforts of Emile Durkheim in his magnum opus *the division of labor in society*, where he has made evolutionary assumptions regarding a transformation of society from *mechanical* to *organic solidarity*.

Last decade of 19th century was a game changer with respect to the widely held conception regarding evolutionism. In anthropology it was Franz Boas and his disciples who fought against this widely held conception of unilineal evolutionism. He was of the opinion that neither history nor cultures had any patterns at all¹ and that each culture has its own unique structure and unique history, hence making generalizations regarding history and culture is not the right way to deal with different societies.

Although during that period it faced tremendous criticism in and off but to negate the presence of evolutionary perspective of social change during the period of immense criticism, will be wrong. Instead it was William Graham Sumner and his students who embraced it once again. Keeping both the scenarios intact, I must say that in order to save their intellectual reputation, scholars during that period were very reluctant to follow or adopt such theory of social change due to its enormous criticism and lack of logic.

What is wrong with the Theory of SOCIAL EVOLUTION?

The early evolutionary doctrines were readily accepted because they served the colonial interests of Europeans. Such theories provided a justification of colonial rule over primitive peoples. Those who were in favour of such doctrine has least concept of *cultural relativity* and judged other cultures through their own cultural standards. Following points will clearly tell us where has evolutionary model went wrong:

1. It is often asserted that the evolutionary theories often have an endogenous bias, that is, those dealing with such approach look society from insider's view only and neglect the role of external influences, such as political revolutions and cultural diffusion.
2. Evolutionary theories has frequently been charged for its illegitimate approach of explaining history and social change teleologically and inevitable process of development, thus conceiving history as nothing but the unfolding of predetermined patterns towards some ultimate goal².
3. Anthony Giddens, one of the leading anti-evolutionist has made an important point while criticizing such theories. He argued that such theories have minimized the role of human agency, which for Giddens completely invalidates any social theory. For Giddens such stance has reduced the individual's position to a mere spectator of blind social forces.

4. The theory of social evolution is also criticized for its bias toward Western social development. The concept of social progress assumes a dichotomy of traditional and modern societies with the conclusion that modern societies are more developed than traditional ones. Since modernity emerged in Western societies, this argument puts Western capitalism at the center of the analysis and uses it as a benchmark for understanding traditional societies. The theory's built-in bias makes it unacceptable.

Furthermore, the unilineal evolutionary theories of social change described but did not explain social change. They haven't given any convincing explanation of how or why societies should evolve towards the western pattern. The theories under such domain were based on faulty interpretation of data, as Ian Robertson has argued:

'Different theorists grouped vastly different cultures into misleading categories so that they would fit into various stages of evolution'. [Ian Robertson].

With regard to first point of criticism, Leslie white³ for the first time took up the criticism and maintained that it is wrong to portray that evolutionary theories has endogenous bias only and maintained that evolutionist are exogenists also and give due importance to external influences as well. Furthermore, referring to the criticism made by Anthony Giddens regarding individual alienation during the process of evolution needs to be addressed. For me, the revolution that transforms society from one epoch to another epoch has always been the creation of individuals and they aren't mute spectators during such processes. No one in the Neolithic revolution was reacting blindly to unseen social forces, instead structure and agency were intertwined. Individual creating history doesn't mean a free hand, instead he initiates a change but is always checked by the larger structure. As Marx said "Men make history, but they do not make it exactly as they please".

The modern anthropologists have tended to support the theory of multilinear evolution instead of unilineal one. They agree that this evolutionary process is multilinear. It can take place in many different ways and change need not necessarily follow the same pattern everywhere. They do not press the analogy between societies and living organisms. They do not equate change with progress. They at the same time do not assume that greater social complexity produces greater uniformity and happiness. That is the reason this theory is again making a strong foothold nowadays which culminates into a new era of *neo-evolutionary theories* of social change⁴.

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