Unit 10 – Social change

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the final podcast for Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing social change. Social change is one of the most important topics in sociology. Looking around us, we can see plenty of evidence that things change. The world is very different than it was a few generations ago. But how and why do things change? This is a critical question for all societies.

Every society has to find a way to balance continuity and change. We've spent several units of this course looking at how continuity is achieved. For example, socialization is a key way that people transmit their values, preferences, and expectations to their children. Roles also play a part – as we saw, the social world is full of formal and informal roles that young people inherit from their elders. Last but not least, culture also contributes to continuity, particularly by passing on traditions, customs, and moral codes.

At the same time, though, change does happen. Not surprisingly, sociologists do not agree completely on how this happens. As we've seen before, opinion is generally split into three main camps.

First, let's consider the structural functionalist view of social change. As we've discussed in prior units, functionalists tend to see society as made up of various parts that have to work together to form a whole. The key metaphor here is of an organism or a human body. Not surprisingly, then, functionalists tend to take an **evolutionary** view of social change – as something that should occur gradually over a long period of time (as an aside, many biologists no longer think that evolution in the natural world happens this way, but that is incidental to our discussion here). Because functionalists tend to emphasize stability, consensus, and social cohesion, they see change as a series of **adjustments** to protect or maintain key social institutions. For example, one of the consequences of mass urbanization – when people moved en masse from rural areas to cities during the Industrial Revolution – was a change in the structure of the family. When most of the population was rural, it was not unusual for a family to be made up of several generations living under one roof. This made sense because families worked on farms for the most part, and these were passed down through the generations. When people moved to the cities, they became wage labourers – meaning that they worked as individuals rather than groups. According to the functionalist perspective, the family as a social institution *adjusted* to this new economic reality. Away from the farm, both children and grandparents lost their economic value and became an economic burden – encouraging families to shrink. Importantly, though, they didn't go away – they changed.

This functionalist view suggests that change is OK so long as there is enough time for other social institutions to adapt. Functionalists argue that if change happens too fast, it can lead to a condition called **anomie**. Anomie is a state of confusion or "normlessness", where people don't know how to adjust to new realities. A recent example are the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. You may be too young to remember, but the shock of these events caused some significant behavioural changes. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, people were shocked out of their regular routines, including shopping and spending. For a short time, consumerist values lost their meaning, and people stopped spending their money. This actually caused a big decline in the stock market and a six month recession in the United States, as President Bush urged people to show their patriotism by "going back to the mall". The norms and values that anchored American life – and Canadian too – lost their hold over us, for a short time, but at significant cost.

The second perspective on social change that we'll consider is the symbolic interactionst view. As we saw earlier in the course, interactionists tend to emphasize the role that individuals play in creating social structure. According to this view, social change happens whenever there is a *re-negotiation* of key social norms. For example, over the past 30 years or so Canadians and our institutions have experienced a re-negotiation of the norms around smoking. When I was growing up, it was common to see people smoking – not only in restaurants and bars, but also on airplanes and in movie theatres. My father used to smoke while watching me play minor hockey from the stands! Recently, though, the norms and rules around smoking have changed drastically. Doctors, epidemiologists, and health professionals have convinced law-makers that second-hand smoke is a serious danger to non-smokers. More importantly, smoking has become a shameful habit – something that people are expected to hide or apologize for. Ottawa's new bylaw which bans smoking in city parks has little to do with health, but is consistent with re-negotiation of smoking that classifies it as a deviant activity. Smoking rates are now at the lowest they have ever been, especially for youth, as the social definition of this activity changes.

According to interactionists, social change happens when ideas about "what is acceptable" change. Individual people and social groups therefore have a strong influence on change, as they can try to advocate change (or resist it) by advancing arguments and values into the public sphere. In other words, change doesn't happen *to* people (as implied in the functionalist view), but is caused *by* people negotiating with each other and broader social institutions.

Finally, let's talk about the conflict theory view of change. As discussed earlier, the conflict paradigm sees society as comprised of different interest groups that compete for social resources – with certain groups holding advantages over others, including rich over poor, men over women, and ethnic majorities over minorities. According to this view, social change happens when groups at the bottom end of the social scale gain enough power to disrupt the system.

Usually this is prompted by a build-up of grievances. For example, let's consider the social disruption of the 1960s and 1970s that gave rise to so much change – including the environmental movement, the peace movement, the civil rights movement, and the feminist movement. These changes were predominantly caused by youth activism and protests. But why then? First of all, the 1960s and 1970s saw the arrival of a large cohort called "baby boomers" into early adulthood. These were children born in the late 1940s and 1950s after the Second World War, during which many people had postponed having kids. Generally speaking, youth have less power than adults – they are less represented in government, for instance, and are subject to laws rather than being law-writers. In any case, this large number of young people was also under threat by the ongoing Vietnam War. In the United States, a lack of volunteers for the armed forces led the government to institute the draft, whereby young men were chosen by lottery for mandatory service. As young people began to protest this, they were often met with force. At Kent State University, for example, the National Guard opened fire on student protesters in 1970, killing four. This was followed by riots in several US cities, including New York, and large scale marches on Washington DC. While the "hippie" movement as it's sometimes called is often caricatured, it did in fact prompt a great degree of social change – in government, policing, foreign policy, women's reproductive rights, and treatment of minorities.

The key metaphor for conflict theorists to understand social change is an "earthquake". In the natural world, earthquakes are caused by the build-up of tension as large geological plates press against each other. This tension can build up for a long period of time before being released – suddenly and most often unpredictably. Conflict theorists look at social change the same way. Over time, grievances build up among people who are disadvantaged by the current social, political, and economic system. But grievances are usually not enough to get conflicts out into the open. What is required is a **political opportunity** or opening, and these are difficult to predict. The Kent State shootings, for example, galvanized young people in a big way and contributed to a chain of events that eventually led to the end of the Vietnam war. But the youth movement was itself inspired by the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s that was led by charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. The civil rights movement in turn drew on public disgust over how the Nazis in Germany had treated minorities. In other words, while "social earthquakes" are difficult to predict, they usually have deep roots and are strong forces for social change.

