

## Interpreting Social Change Theories: Structural-Functional Theory and Conflict Theory in Focus

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تفسير التغير الاجتماعي  
في ضوء النظرية البنائية-الوظيفية والنظرية الصراعية

### Abstract:

This article attempts to present a series of definitions and theories dealing with social change and that have emerged in the sociological field. Thus, the first part deals with the definition of social change being an ever-present phenomenon in any society, whereas the second part deals with a number of theories that explain social change: First, the structural-functional theory that believes in the linked social systems completing each other and that a change occurring in one institution will make changes occur in other institutions. Second, the Conflict theory that admits the constant struggle for resources which represents according to theorists a fundamental condition for change.

**Keywords:** social change; interpreting; structural-functional theory; conflict theory; society.

### المخلص:

تحاول هذه المقالة تقديم مجموعة من التعريفات والنظريات التي أنتجت

في الميدان السوسيولوجي حول موضوع التغير الاجتماعي. وعليه، يتطرق الجزء الأول إلى تعريف التغير الاجتماعي باعتباره ظاهرة دائمة متواجدة في أي مجتمع. أما الجزء الثاني فيعرض عددا من النظريات المفسرة للتغير الاجتماعي وهي: النظرية البنائية-الوظيفية التي يُعتَقَدُ من منظورها أن الأنظمة الاجتماعية تترابط وتتكامل مع بعضها البعض، وأن حدوث تغيير في إحدى المؤسسات سيُحدث تغييرا في المؤسسات الأخرى. أما وفق نظرية الصراع فإن المجتمع في نزاع دائم على الموارد، وهذا الصراع يدفع إلى التغير الاجتماعي، ومن هنا يؤكد أصحاب النظرية أن الصّراع هو شرط أساسي للتغير.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التغير الاجتماعي؛ تفسير؛ النظرية البنائية -  
الوظيفية؛ النظرية الصراعية؛ المجتمع.

## Introduction

Researchers have long focused on change since it is one of the social phenomena that attract different social disciplines like philosophy, anthropology and even psychology. The major result of such fields' researches showed that ancient and modern societies, developed or not, Arab or foreign ones, all declare a real truth that they are not static but dynamic, changing continuously; the difference existing between these societies is due to the extent and speed of the factors leading to change.

In this context, Malin Lindberg affirms that "change is a social phenomenon that occurs everywhere and every-when. (Jaber, 2011, p23), whereas Wilbert Ellis Moore declares that it is not a modern phenomenon. (Izzat, 2011: p604).

In a word, "the most constant element in life is change" which means that it is a natural order of things, and

that the nature and particularity of the changing human community does not stand still. This leads to question the matter of social change: What is social change? And what are the social theories that contributed in interpreting social change phenomenon?

### **Methodology and research procedures**

In the purpose of tackling the above mentioned problematic, some hypotheses were deployed:

- Social change is regarded as a continuous and global social phenomenon,
- Many theories differ in interpreting social change: while the conflict theory finds that change is due to struggle and competition among social classes, the structural-functional theory admits that a change in a social system leads inevitably to a change in the whole social systems.

As for the method itself, it is to be the interpretative method to unveil the causal and relational link between the social phenomena that lead directly or indirectly to internal social change. In this context, Emile Durkheim declares that "all this science requires is that people should admit that causality as a principle is applicable even on social phenomena (Hamdawi, nd: p14-15).

As for the last phase, the research is to be presented in the following points: Definition of social change, and social change interpretative theories presentation: the conflict theory and the structural-functional theory.

### **1. Definition of social change**

Social change is one of the most important topics that sociology tackles. It has attracted many scholars and

researchers like Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), Guy Rocher (1924- ), Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962), who, all and every, provided a different definition to it. Despite the multiple definitions given, there is still some difficulty to draw an accurate one to social change since all things in life are subject to continuous, or rather eternal change.

Emile Durkheim defines social change as being “every change showing those transformations imposed on individuals” (Trémoulinas, 2006, p07). On his turn, Georges Khal says that social change is “all the transformations observed in time, with temporary or eternal impact on the structure and function of the social system of the society, and which plays a role in changing the course of history” (Sécolier, 2010).

In this context also, Guy Rocher defines social change as being any transformation in the social structure that can be observed in time, but is not temporary or ephemeral, and has an impact on the structure or on the social institutions functions to change the course of life. (Mounier, 2005: p01).

Likewise, Everett Rogers says that social change is that process that helps in modifying the structure and the function of the social pattern. This structure is then made of the different abilities of the individuals and collectivities forming this structure. As for the functional element within this structure, it is the individual’s role or actual behavior in a specific position. Thus, change for Rogers is rather a process, not a case, and hence it has neither a beginning nor an end and lasts through time. (Moslih, 2002: p51).

To sum up, the above-mentioned definitions revealed that social change is a general phenomenon that is common in

all societies. It is limited in time, i.e. it starts in a specific point in time and ends in another point in time, and it is subject to lasting and continuing. Additionally, social change concerns many systems such as the social, political, religious, economic, educational ones and the like, whether in structure or in function. Likewise, innovation is a result of change on individuals, while social change is due to internal and external factors, and can be planned just as it can be spontaneous.

## 2. Social theories interpreting social change

When interpreting social change, social theories rely on field experiments and believe somehow in relative results that concern different societies; these experiments are held in different periods of time which lead to unstable and inconstant results. This social trend includes the following theories.

### 2.1 The Structural-Functional Theory

The structural-functional theory came into existence by the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> Century as a reaction to criticism coming up to the structural theory and the functional theory; this is on the one hand. On the other hand, it is a continuation of the works initiated by both theories.

Among the leaders of the structural-functional theory, there are Robert King Merton, Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. According to Ihssan Muhamad Alhassan (2005), the general principles they agreed upon are that “the society, the institution or the community can be analyzed structurally or functionally into initial elements”.

Additionally, the functions of the society, the institution or the community answer the needs of the

individuals belonging to it, or the needs of even other individuals. These needs can be spiritual or material, psychological or social; functions that are latent or even overt. Then, every part of the society, institution or community, has structural functions originated from that very part” (Alhassan, 2005: p48-50).

It is worth mentioning that the structural-functional theory has contributed in interpreting social change relying on the principle of interlinked affection among social systems, that is to mean that any change occurring in one of the social systems should necessarily affect the other systems of the same society; social change is additionally a dynamic change because it is a natural phenomenon.

### **2.1.1 The Structural-Functional Theory according to Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955):**

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s main idea in interpreting social change is that it is a question of reaction or more. He asserts that change is internal and external and cares about the intellectual factors that lead to change, especially the religious one. Radcliffe-Brown also mentions the importance of development that allows people to master the physical environment through providing more knowledge and improving artistic fields thanks to inventions and discoveries” (Aljulani, 2004: p174-177).

In other terms, scientific discoveries and inventions, according to Radcliffe-Brown, represent a source of change that spontaneously contribute in change inside any society whether in the structure or the function in order to achieve social balance and overcome social issues that can disrupt the system as a whole.

Actually Radcliffe-Brown does not deny evolutionism, but rather believes in it; he often declared that he is an evolutionary researcher but refuses the deviationist position of the evolutionists in looking for origins instead of the rules regulating and affecting the evolution process. In this sense, Cohen sums up four assumptions that represent the core of The Evolution Theory and which have been refused by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski:

- Contemporary primitive societies represent the first steps of the human social evolution,
- These societies can stand on specific points in an evolution sequence in comparison to certain and static points of evolution,
- Evolution history of the society or the community of neighboring societies can be reformulated or reformed when taking into consideration the presence of particular characteristics as sources to explain the past.
- The existence of characteristics that are non-compatible to a specific period can be regarded as characteristics belonging to a previous period. (Aljulani, 2004: p176-177).

Based on a scientific methodology, Radcliffe-Brown's approach to social phenomena in general and social change in particular denies any breach between the theoretical part and the field part on the one hand; and on the other hand, it focuses to deal with the phenomenon through the comparative approach and the historical approach. For that reason, he says that the greatest value of history for the values of a society is that it provides us with the hows of social patterns change. (Aljulani, 2004: p175).

As for the criticism that came up to this theory, it is to mention that Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation of social change is from a positive viewpoint since change contributes in creating equilibrium inside the society, yet we are aware that not all changes are positive; a negative one can cause a social disruption.

As for the origins themselves, Radcliffe-Brown limited the origins of social change to discoveries and scientific inventions; this is not necessarily true because the origins of change themselves are changing and not constant because time and space are changing.

### **2.1.2 The structural-functional theory according to Talcott Parsons (1902-1979):**

Parsons main idea about social change is that changes that take place in society are functional leading to a change in the structure of the society.

Historically speaking, and in an article published in 1955 on "Social Tensions in America", Parsons argues that tensions are primarily the result of the conflicts between the demands placed via a new position and the subjective power of its social structure that generally fights the necessary changes. This is the analysis Parsons has made over the efficiency of tensions.

Aiming at precisizing the origins of social change, Parsons revealed that change in society is in two origins: the external origin that can be resumed in environmental tensions on the institution; the internal origin consists of tensions from the institution itself (the society), and the response of the society to these tensions reflects a dynamic equilibrium.



To support the theory, evolution process for Parsons is in reality a support for the society ability for adaptation. It is worth to add that Parsons' formulation of social change is in three samples: ordered change due to external factors sample, revolution change sample, and, organic change due to internal factors (Aljulani, 2004: p178-183).

Among the criticism that has been directed to Talcott Parsons on this point, let's say that it is not necessary to respond to the internal and external tensions that the society is exposed to in order to create that dynamic equilibrium, but it may rather lead to the creation of misbalance in the society. Thus, it is admitted that Parsons has limited social change in the positive itinerary and not the negative one; hence, every social phenomenon has a positive side and a negative one.

The effect of tensions on social change process is the result of a conflict between the social structure of the society and the new position, and getting rid of these tensions can be through shifting from conventional stereo types to new ones. In this respect, Talcott Parsons neglects Relativity principle as far as time, space and social conditions are concerned when approaching social change phenomenon.

In a word, the interpretation of social change according to the structural-functional theory can be resumed in the fact that it relies on the principle of a two-way effect because any change occurring in a social pattern will impact on the other social patterns forming that society, and that social change is a dynamic change because it is a natural phenomenon. Among the notions that form the platform of this theory, there is social equilibrium, social adaptation, social integration, social stability and finally social continuation.

## 2.2 The Conflict Theory:

Conflict theory is one of the social theories that have attracted many scientists because it insists on the necessity to look at the society as being composed of a group against a group. It is known for the conflicting interests and the fight of the competing powers whether to keep powerful or to keep in power, and from this fight change emerges to be not only inevitable but also deserved. Society within conflict remains dynamic. The fight of powers leads to the redistribution of these powers; this is the best reaction to the interests of the society members. But this fight lasts long and with power society changes. (Sayed&al, 2002: p117).

The interpretation of social change according to the conflict theory is to focus on the following ideas:

- Every society is in an eternal and continuous change,
- Change process is resumed in the continuous conflict and struggle,
- Exploitation, injustice, oppression as well as inequality exist in all societies: this obviously leads to revolution against the deplorable social situation.

Many are the leaders of this theory; let's cite Karl Marx, Wright Mills, Vilfredo Pareto and Ralf Dahrendorf among others.

### 2.2.1 The Conflict Theory according to Karl Marx (1818-1883):

Karl Marx's writings made of him one of the most famous leaders of this theory. Among the books he published on it are: "Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy, published in 1857 (In German: **Grundrisse** der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie), "Capital", published in 1867 (In German: Das Kapital), "The German Ideology", published in 1846 (In German: Die Deutsche Ideology), "Communist Manifesto", published in 1848 (In German: Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei), "The Holy Family", published with Engels in 1845 (In German: Die heilige Familie, originally: Kritik der kritischen Kritik), and also "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", published in 1884 with Friedrich Engels (In German: Der Ursprung der Familie, Privateigentums und des Staats).

The theory according to Marx relies on a conflict among social classes. He mentioned in Das Kapital that humanity is the history of social class conflict; this latter is a conflict between two estranged classes, namely the ruling and the ruled classes, or the oppressing and oppressed classes. It is well-known then that such a sort of conflict exists in slave-based societies, Feudal societies and Capitalist ones.

In this context, Marx recalls that human history does not witness class conflicts only but conflicting, monopolistic and exploitative tragedies that join the conflicts.

As for the main cause of class warfare in the above mentioned societies, there is the material factor; a class owning production means and another class possessing labor to be sold for a wage (a pittance, a little pay) given by employers. Production means owners are often high-spirited and enjoy social influence, respect and consideration; whereas the working class is demoralized and emotionally traumatized, socially not respected and has neither power nor social and political influence.

The calamitous situation the working class lives in generates in class consciousness, that awareness which results in the workers' unity then in revolutionary organization against the ruling class. This revolution leads to the decline of the society and its shift to another type characterized by progress and development compared to the former type of society. (Alhassan, 2005: 127-130).

In this respect, Marx notes that change motive is the inconsistency between the social classes (Gilgen Leandro,nd:p 614). This inconsistency necessarily leads to conflict then to social change. Societies from Marx's point of view shift from slave-based societies to feudal ones, and then from feudal societies to capitalist ones, and later from capitalist societies to socialist ones; from private to public ownership; from inequality to equality. Contextually this class phenomenon leads to the conflicting phenomenon, and this latter leads to social change, "knowing that shift or social change is a historical, material, and dialectical". Change is historical because it is stuck to the society's ancient and modern history. (Alhassan, 2005:p 130).

Much criticism was directed to Karl Marx despite the efforts he has made to interpret the phenomenon of social change. First, the Marxist Theory is based on a materialistic thought and belongs then to the economic determinism which notes that the economic factor is the key determinant to build and develop a society, and thus ignores the other factors.

Second, relying on the economic system to interpret the social change inside the society and ignoring the other social systems existing in it is a big mistake made by Marx because the society is a group of organisms that highly or lightly affect and are affected by each other, continuously or temporarily, in a conflicting or completing way.

Third, Karl Marx considers social change as a constant calculation with a determined and final result; hence, he took neither time nor space into consideration, or even the conditions of the society. It is also worth to notice that Karl Marx moved from his material thought to the value criterion one since he evoked inequality and injustice in the distribution of wealth.

Then, revolutionary organization that is characterized by violence does not necessarily give birth to a new developed society, knowing that according to Karl Marx “violence is the midwife for all old societies pregnant of a new society”. (Sayed& al., 2002: p122). Additionally, achieving social justice and self-assertion for workers is not to be through revolutionary violence.

When interpreting social change, the Marxist theory relies on the internal factors in the social structure itself, thus ignoring the external factors that may in a way have an effect. So, it is not possible to acknowledge the inevitability of shifting from the capitalist society to the socialist one because contemporary societies are adopting the capitalist system, and

so the rule of individualistic principle i.e. private ownership of the means of production for instance.

To admit that more success of the ruling class ultimately leads to its failure is a wrong assumption because success that is basically built on correct, right and strong bases cannot fail or be destroyed but rather continues to develop in attaining success in the social system in general and the economic one particularly.

### **2.2.2 The Conflict Theory according to Ralf Dahrendorf (1929-2009):**

Ralf Dahrendorf is one of the leaders of the theory of conflict. He differs from Karl Marx in many points: "If Marx considers the causes of conflict in the society to be the unjust distribution of the means of production that creates that conflict between those who own and those who do not, Dahrendorf insists in most of his works that conflict is caused by the unjust distribution of power in the society because those who have power and rule want to keep it and those who live this pressure want to change power relations, and then comes the conflict that leads to change in the society. (Sayed& al., 2002: p128).

Dahrendorf has built his analysis of the conflict on two levels:

- The first level: The intensity of the conflict referring to the extent of strength linked to it and the emotions it delivers and the importance of winning or failing.
- The second level: Violence that is issued from the means to be used. Dahrendorf considers that violence does not result in a radical change in the structure because such a change relies on the intensity of the conflict (Sayed& al., 2002: p128-129).

In his analysis of the social change phenomenon, Dahrendorf relies on two fundamental concepts that are power and rule; rule is the legal aspect of power that justifies the existence of an upward relationship and an undergoing one. That is because the power owner describes specific behaviors to the submissive in a form of order or interdiction having full right for that because rule is a legal relationship between them; it is not based on personal affairs, but on expectations linked to the social condition within the organizational structure. This system is confirmedly functioning in the light of an organization that contains limits guaranteeing regulation” (Nouri & Othman, 2009: p37).

The bilateral roles in the organizational structure that exists between two contradicting groups (one possessing power and authority, and another possessing nothing) create a conflict. This latter is the result of inconsistency and divergence of both parts’ interests, but the part that does not own power tends to change the conditions, while the ruling part owning power and authority tends to keep the situation still. This can eventually lead to the possibility to the outbreak of a revolution.

As for the criticism coming up to this theory, one can mention that revolutionary violence does not necessarily assure attaining social control and organization. It is also admitted that inconsistent interests between two groups lead to conflict because this latter is a social process continuing in time and spreading in space, but the point that is still unclear is that Dahrendorf did not show the cause behind conflict, or rather the conflict for the interests of the society as a whole being an organization, or for the interest of a specific group, whether the owning one or the non-owning.

### Conclusion:

The interpretation of social change phenomenon by the above-displayed theories is relying on investigating in social reality of a society; this is on the one hand. On the other hand, the theories carry certain objectives they sought to achieve. Among these objectives, there is the controversy in the conflict theory: While Karl Marx seeks to attain social justice, Dahrendorf seeks to obtain control. As for the structural-functional theory, it seeks to create a certain balance and adaptation within the society.

This paper suggests the necessity to join the principles of the structural-functional theory to the ones of the conflict theory to interpret the social change phenomenon. It also points out the necessity to distinguish between the main patterns and the sub patterns to interpret it according to the structural-functional viewpoint. Additionally there should not be a conviction that social change is a natural phenomenon that cannot be ignored, nor can it be interpreted on one particular side. In other words, this phenomenon consists of many parts that contribute in change inside the society.

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