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Q5(e)

Explain the relevance of the idea of 'cultural lag' in understanding social change.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Social Change in Modern Society

Social Change in Modern Society: Sociological theories of social change; Development and dependency; Agents of social change; Education and social change; Science, technology and social change.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the relevance of the idea of 'cultural lag' in understanding social change
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Ogburn**: **material culture** often outruns norms and law.

The gap helps read factory law, gig work, and kinship honour under new techniques.

Durkheim's anomie and Merton's strain are neighbouring ideas.

Weber shows ideas can lead; **Marx** shows who profits from delay.

Relevant as uneven change, not as a universal law.

Introduction

William F. **Ogburn's** cultural lag says **material culture**, especially technology, often changes faster than non-material norms, laws, and values. The gap is a way of reading strain in social change, not a law of all history.

Body

The idea

- When a technique arrives, family, law, and honour may still run on the old timetable.
- Maladjustment, not only invention, becomes the sociological object.

Relevance

- Industrial machinery arrived before factory law and union rights. **Karl Marx** would stress class, but the lag names the institutional delay.
- Digital platforms and gig work arrived before social security. NFHS and labour surveys still code work in older boxes.
- Reproductive technology and NFHS fertility change outrun kinship honour and son-preference norms.
- **Emile Durkheim's anomie is a cousin**: regulation lags the division of labour. Robert K. Merton's strain is a cousin in goals and means.

Limits

- **Max Weber** showed that ideas, such as the Protestant ethic, can lead economic change. Lag is not always material-first.
- Talcott Parsons's differentiation is a smoother story than lag-as-accident.
- **The idea can hide power:** who benefits from slow law is a Marxist question.

Flow diagram

Material technology -> Faster change
Norms law values -> Slower change
Faster change -> Cultural lag strain
Slower change -> Cultural lag strain

Conclusion

Cultural lag remains relevant as a sketch of uneven change between technique and norm. Pair it with **Marx**, **Durkheim**, and **Weber** so that delay is not mistaken for a natural timetable or for the whole of change.

Facts & figures

Ogburn

Cultural lag: adaptive culture trails material invention, producing maladjustment.

Material culture

Tools, machines, and techniques in Ogburn's contrast with values and institutions.

Anomie

Durkheim's lag of moral regulation behind a new division of labour.

Gig platforms

A contemporary Indian illustration of technique ahead of labour law and social security.