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Q8(b)

Discuss various theories of social change. Explain the limitations of unilinear theory of social change

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- **Survey major theories of social change:** evolutionary, cyclical, conflict, functional, and modernisation or world-system if tight
- **Explain unilinear theory and its limitations:** Eurocentrism, teleology, ignoring diversity and reversal
- Keep named theorists

Revision summary

Social change is theorised as evolution, cycle, conflict, functional adaptation and global hierarchy.

Unilinear evolution claims one sequence of stages for all societies.

Comte, Morgan and some readings of **Marx** illustrate the ladder form.

Limits include Eurocentrism, teleology and weak handling of collapse and mixture.

Multilinear and dependency arguments were developed against that ladder.

Differentiation can be kept as a theme without a compulsory staircase.

Introduction

Theories of social change try to say how and why societies become different over time. Some see a ladder of stages. Some see cycles. Some see struggle. Some see the working out of functions and adaptation. Unilinear evolutionary theory is the most famous ladder. Its limits are now part of the standard sociological critique, and they should be explained after the wider map of theories.

Body**Various theories of social change**

Evolutionary theories, from Auguste Comte's three stages and Herbert Spencer's movement from simple to complex, to L. H. Morgan's savagery-barbarism-civilisation, treat change as directional growth. **Cyclical** theories, in Vilfredo Pareto's circulation of elites, Oswald Spengler, and to some extent Pitrim Sorokin's cultural mentalities, treat rise and fall as recurrence. **Conflict** theories, especially **Karl Marx's** historical materialism, treat contradiction and class struggle as the motor. **Functionalist** theories, in **Durkheim's** differentiation and Parsons's pattern variables and later AGIL adaptation, treat change as a response to strain while seeking a new equilibrium. **Modernisation** theory in the

mid-twentieth century, associated with writers such as W. W. Rostow in economics and several American sociologists, expected poor countries to follow a Western industrial path. **Dependency and world-systems** theories, from Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, reversed that hope and located change in a global hierarchy. **Max Weber** offered no single law, but rationalisation and unintended consequences as historical processes.

Unilinear theory and its limitations

Unilinear evolution says that all societies pass through the same sequence of stages toward a single mature form, usually modelled on nineteenth-century Europe. Comte, Morgan and, in a cruder textbook form, some colonial anthropology used this shape. **Marx's** preface can be read as a sequence of modes of production, though he also wrote about the Asiatic form and later correspondence that complicates a single ladder.

Limitations are several. The theory is **Eurocentric**. It takes one region's history as the destiny of all. It is **teleological**. It reads the past as if it had to produce the present. It ignores **multilinear paths, which Julian Steward and later anthropologists stressed: irrigation states, pastoralists and industrial societies do not sit on one rung-list. It handles reversal, collapse and mixture** poorly. Empires fall. Hybrid institutions are normal. It can justify colonial rule as a push up the ladder. Yogendra Singh's work on modernisation of Indian tradition, and critiques by dependency writers, show that contact with the West does not simply replay European stages. Gender and ecology are almost invisible on the old ladders.

- **A better use of evolutionary ideas is limited:** increasing differentiation is a useful theme, as in **Durkheim**, without a claim that every people must repeat the same rungs.

Flow diagram

Evolutionary
Cyclical
Conflict Marx
Functionalist
World-system
Unilinear ladder -> Eurocentrism teleology
Evolutionary -> Unilinear ladder

Conclusion

Theories of social change include evolution, cycle, conflict, function and global hierarchy. Unilinear evolution claims one ladder for all societies. Its limits are Eurocentrism, teleology, and blindness to diverse paths and reversals. Change is real. It is not one compulsory staircase.

Facts & figures

Comte's three stages

Theological, metaphysical and positive, a classic unilinear scheme of intellectual and social development.

Multilinear evolution

Steward's alternative: different environments and histories produce different sequences, not one ladder.

Dependency critique

The claim that poor societies are not at an earlier rung but are shaped by unequal global relations.

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