

Types of Sociological Theories

Evolutionary Theories

Evolutionary theories are based on the assumption that societies gradually change from simple beginnings into even more complex forms. Early sociologists beginning with Auguste Comte believed that human societies evolve in a unilinear way- that is in one line of development. According to them social change meant progress toward something better. They saw change as positive and beneficial. To them the evolutionary process implied that societies would necessarily reach new and higher levels of civilization. L.H Morgan believed that there were three basic stages in the process: savagery, barbarism and civilization. Auguste Comte's ideas relating to the three stages in the development of human thought and also of society namely- the theological, the metaphysical and the positive in a way represent the three basic stages of social change. This evolutionary view of social change was highly influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of Organic Evolution.

Those who were fascinated by this theory applied it to the human society and argued that societies must have evolved from the simple and primitive to that of too complex and advanced such as the western society. Herbert Spencer a British sociologist carried this analogy to its extremity. He argued that society itself is an organism. He even applied Darwin's principle of the survival of the fittest to human societies. He said that society has been gradually progressing towards a better state. He argued that it has evolved from military society to the industrial society. He claimed that western races, classes or societies had survived and evolved because they were better adapted to face the conditions of life. This view known as social Darwinism got widespread popularity in the late 19th century. It survived even during the first phase of the 20th century. Emile Durkheim identified the cause of societal evolution as a society's increasing moral density. Durkheim viewed societies as changing in the direction of greater differentiation, interdependence and formal control under the pressure of increasing moral density. He advocated that societies have evolved from a relatively undifferentiated social structure with minimum of division of labor and with a kind of solidarity called mechanical solidarity to a more differentiated social structure with maximum division of labor giving rise to a kind of solidarity called organic solidarity.

Functionalist or Dynamic theories:

In the middle decades of the 20th century a number of American sociologists shifted their attention from social dynamics to social static or from social change to social stability. Talcott Parsons stressed the importance of cultural patterns in controlling the stability of a society. According to him society has the ability to absorb disruptive forces while maintaining overall stability. Change is not as something that disturbs the social equilibrium but as something that alters the state of equilibrium so that a qualitatively new equilibrium results. He has stated that



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changes may arise from two sources. They may come from outside the society through contact with other societies. They may also come from inside the society through adjustment that must be made to resolve strains within the system. Parsons speaks of two processes that are at work in social change. In simple societies institutions are undifferentiated that is a single institution serves many functions. The family performs reproductive, educational, socializing, economic, recreational and other functions. A process of differentiation takes place when the society becomes more and more complex. Different institutions such as school, factory may take over some of the functions of a family. The new institutions must be linked together in a proper way by the process of integration. New norms must be established in order to govern the relationship between the school and the home. Further bridging institutions such as law courts must resolve conflicts between other components in the system.

Conflict theories:

Whereas the equilibrium theories emphasize the stabilizing processes at work in social systems the so-called conflict theories highlight the forces producing instability, struggle and social disorganization. According to Ralf Dahrendorf the conflict theories assume that - every society is subjected at every moment to change, hence social change is ubiquitous. Every society experiences at every moment social conflict, hence social conflict is ubiquitous. Every element in society contributes to change. Every society rests on constraint of some of its members by others. The most famous and influential of the conflict theories is the one put forward by Karl Marx who along with Engel wrote in Communist Manifesto 'all history is the history of class conflict.' Individuals and groups with opposing interests are bound to be at conflict. Since the two major social classes the rich and poor or capitalists and the proletariat have mutually hostile interests they are at conflict. History is the story of conflict between the exploiter and the exploited. This conflict repeats itself off and on until capitalism is overthrown by the workers and a socialist state is created. What is to be stressed here is that Marx and other conflict theorists deem society as basically dynamic and not static. They consider conflict as a normal process. They also believe that the existing conditions in any society contain the seeds of future social changes. Like Karl Marx George Simmel too stressed the importance of conflict in social change. According to him conflict is a permanent feature of society and not just a temporary event. It is a process that binds people together in interaction. Further conflict encourages people of similar interests to unite together to achieve their objectives. Continuous conflict in this way keeps society dynamic and ever changing.