Chapter Fifteen: Social Change and the Environment

Learning Objectives

- Understand the relevance of the four social revolutions.
- Explain the change from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft societies.
- Identify the role of global politics and shifting arrangements of power among nations.
- Understand the unilinear, multilinear, and cyclical theories of social change.
- Analyze Marx and Ogburn’s theories of social change.
- Explore the changes and concerns that technology brings to our lives.
- Distinguish between the different types of social movements and the different stages that they undergo.
- Understand the significance of propaganda and learn how to avoid being misled by propaganda.
- Explore the environmental problems related to economic growth.
- Understand the role of environmental movements and the scope of environmental sociology.

What’s New in Henslin’s 10th Edition?

- New opening vignette (p. 449)
- “One Laptop per Child Project” (p. 455)
- Thinking Critically Section: Cyber War and Cyber Defense (p. 459)
- Sociology and the New Technology: The Coming Star Wars (p. 460)
- Down-to-Earth Sociology: “Tricks of the Trade”—Deception and Persuasion in Propaganda (p. 464)
- Thinking Critically Section: Which Side of the Barricades? Prochoice and Prolife as a Social Movement (pp. 466-467)
- Russian environmentalists’ setback: Putin gave his personal permission to pollute Lake Baikal (p. 468)

Chapter Summary

The rapid, far-reaching social change that the world is currently experiencing did not “just happen.” It is the result of forces set into motion thousands of years ago. Transforming the course of human history, social change—the alteration of culture and societies over time—is a vital part of social life.
When technology changes, societies also change. The primary changes in human history are tied to the four social revolutions: domestication, agriculture, industrialization, and information. The change from Gemeinschaft societies to Gesellschaft societies, capitalism and industrialization, modernization, and global stratification are other examples of social change that have greatly affected our lives. Social movements, conflict, power, and global politics also contribute to social change.

Social change has fascinated theorists. Theories of social change include evolutionary theories (both unilinear and multilinear), cyclical theories, and conflict theories. Unilinear theories assume all societies follow the same path. Multilinear propose that different routes can lead to the same stage of development. Cyclical theories attempt to account for the rise of entire civilizations.

William Ogburn identified technology as the basic cause of social change. According to Ogburn, technology changes society through invention, discovery, and diffusion. Ogburn also coined the term “cultural lag” to describe how some elements of a culture typically lag behind the changes that come from invention, discovery, and diffusion. Changes in technology often have profound effects on social life. They can significantly change social organizations, ideology, values, and social relationships.

Computers have changed our lives in our social interactions, education, business and financial practices, international conflicts, and military defense weapons. While computers have created many positive aspects, there are also fears associated with the lack of privacy computers may create.

There are six types of social movements, and each movement goes through several stages. Social movements may be bolstered or undermined by mass media coverage and propaganda.

Not all societal changes are necessarily good. The globalization of capitalism has significantly contributed to environmental problems. The environmental problems of the Most Industrialized Nations include toxic waste, acid rain, and global warming. As the Industrializing and Least Industrialized Nations rush to industrialize, they are also damaging the environment. In many cases, the Industrializing and Least Industrialized Nations have caused even greater damage to the environment than the Industrialized Nations. This is because they lack the pollution controls, anti-pollution laws, and experience in dealing with environmental issues that the Industrialized Nations possess. Concerns about the environment have sparked a worldwide environmental movement. This movement seeks to protect the environment through education, legislation, and political activism.

As a relatively recent specialty within sociology, environmental sociology examines how human activities affect the environment and how the environment affects human activities. Although many environmental sociologists are also environmental activists, the roles do not necessarily overlap. There is a mutual concern, however, for a sense of harmony to be developed between technology and the natural environment.
Chapter Outline

I. How Social Change Transforms Social Life
   A. Social change is a shift in the characteristics of culture and societies over time.
   B. There have been four social revolutions: the domestication of plants and animals, from which pastoral and horticultural societies arose; the invention of the plow, leading to agricultural societies; the invention of the steam engine which led to the industrial revolution and produced industrial societies; and now the information revolution, stimulated by the invention of the microchip. Another type of society is emerging based on biotechnology.
   C. The shift from agricultural to industrial economic activity was accompanied by a change from *Gemeinschaft* (daily life centers on intimate and personal relationships) to *Gesellschaft* (people have fleeting, impersonal relationships) societies.
   D. Different sociologists have focused on different forces in order to explain the changes that took place in society at the time of the Industrial Revolution.
      1. Karl Marx identified capitalism as the basic reason behind the breakup of feudal (agricultural) societies. He focused his analysis on the means of production (factories, machinery, and tools): those who owned them dictated the conditions under which workers would work and live. This development set in motion antagonistic relationships between capitalists and workers that remain today.
      2. Max Weber saw religion as the core reason for the development of capitalism: as a result of the Reformation, Protestants no longer felt assured that they were saved by virtue of church membership and concluded that God would show visible favor to the elect. This belief encouraged Protestants to work hard and be thrifty. An economic surplus resulted, stimulating industrialization.
      3. Modernization (the change from agricultural to industrial societies) refers to the sweeping changes in societies brought about by the Industrial Revolution.
      4. When technology changes, societies change. An example today would be how technology from the industrialized world is transforming traditional societies.
   E. Global divisions of power began to emerge in the sixteenth century; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, capitalism and industrialization extended the economic and political ties among the world’s nations.
      1. World system theory asserts that because those nations that were not industrialized became dependent on those that had industrialized, they were unable to develop their own resources.
      2. Since World War II, a realignment of the world’s powers has created a triadic division of the globe, led by Japan, Germany, and the United States. These three powers along with Canada, France, Great Britain, and Italy formed G7 in an effort to forge agreements on global dominance. Russia joined the G7 and it is now known as the G8.
      3. These world powers set policies to perpetuate their global dominance—particularly trying to maintain access to abundant, cheap oil.
      4. G8 faces three major threats: (1) dissention within; (2) the resurgence of China; and (3) the resurgence of ethnic rivalries and conflicts.
5. For global control, G8 requires political and economic stability, both in their own countries and in the countries that provide the raw materials they need.
6. The global powers have come to the realization that African poverty and political corruption breed political unrest that can have damaging consequences.

II. Theories and Processes of Social Change
A. Theories that focus on cultural evolution are either unilinear or multilinear.
   1. Unilinear theories assume that all societies follow the same path, evolving from simple to complex through uniform sequences. One version of this theory proposed by Lewis Morgan, said that all societies go through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization.
   2. Multilinear theories replaced unilinear theories and assume that different routes can lead to a similar stage of development; thus societies need not pass through the same sequence of stages to become industrialized.
   3. Both unilinear and multilinear theories assume the idea that societies progress toward a higher state. However, because of the crises in Western culture today, this assumption has been cast aside and evolutionary theories have been rejected.
B. Theories of natural cycles examine great civilizations, not a particular society; they presume that societies are like organisms: they are born, reach adolescence, grow old, and die.
   1. Toynbee proposed that civilization is initially able to meet challenges, yet when it becomes an empire, the ruling elite loses its capacity to keep the masses in line “by charm rather than by force,” and the fabric of society is then ripped apart.
   2. Oswald Spengler proposed that Western civilization was on the wane; some analysts think the crisis in Western civilization may indicate he was right.
C. Marx’s conflict theory viewed social change as a dialectical process in which the following occurs:
   1. A thesis (a current arrangement of power) contains its own antithesis (a contradiction or opposition), and the resulting struggle between the thesis and its antithesis leads to a synthesis (a new arrangement of power).
   2. Thus, the history of a society is a series of confrontations in which each ruling group creates the seeds of its own destruction (e.g., capitalism sets workers and capitalists on a collision course).
D. William Ogburn identified three processes of social change.
   1. Inventions can be either material (computers) or social (capitalism)
   2. Discovery is a new way of seeing reality (Columbus’ “discovery” of North America
   3. Diffusion is the spread of an invention, discovery, or idea from one area to another.
   4. Ogburn coined the term “cultural lag” to describe the situation in which some elements of a culture adapt to an invention or discovery more rapidly than others. We are constantly trying to catch up with technology by adapting our customs and ways of life to meet its needs.
III. How Technology Is Changing Our Lives
   A. Technology refers to both the tools used to accomplish tasks and to the skills or procedures to make and use those tools.
      1. Technology is an artificial means of extending human abilities.
      2. Although all human groups use technology, it is the chief characteristic of postindustrial societies because it greatly extends our abilities to retrieve and analyze information, communicate, and travel.
      3. The sociological significance of technology is how technology changes our way of life.
   B. The computer is an example of how technology shapes our lives.
      1. Within the field of education, computers are transforming the way children from kindergarten through college learn. Distance learning will become such a part of mainstream education that most students will take at least some of their high school, college, and graduate courses through this arrangement.
      2. In the world of business and finance, computers have made national borders meaningless, as vast amounts of money are instantly transferred from one country to another.
      3. The way wars are fought has also changed because of computers.
   C. Some people have reservations about our computerized society.
      1. Fears range from cyber crime—such as identity theft, to fearing that the government will be able to exert complete control over us.
      2. Cyberspace may create social inequality. On the national level, we could end up with “information have-nots,” primarily inner-city residents cut off from the flow of information. On the global level, unequal access to advanced technology may put the Least Industrialized Nations at a disadvantage.

IV. Social Movements as a Source of Social Change
   A. One result of social inequality is social movements, large numbers of people who are dissatisfied about things, who organize either to promote or to resist social change.
      1. Finding a particular condition of society intolerable, people join together to promote social change. Theirs is called a proactive social movement.
      2. Others feel threatened because some condition of society is changing, and they react to resist that change. Theirs is a reactive social movement.
      3. To further their goals, people establish social movement organizations like the NAACP.
   B. Because social change is their goal, social movements can be classified according to their target and the amount of change they seek.
      1. Alterative social movements seek to alter some specific behavior in individuals.
      2. Redemptive social movements also target individuals, but their goal is total change. An example is a religious social movement that stresses conversion.
      3. Reformative social movements seek to reform some specific aspect of society.
      4. Transformative social movements seek to transform the social order itself.
      5. Transnational social movements (also called new social movements) want to change some specific condition that cuts across societies.
6. The goal of metaformative social movements is to change the social order itself—not just of a specific country, but of an entire civilization, or even the whole world.

C. The leaders of social movements try to manipulate the mass media to influence public opinion.
   1. Propaganda, in the sense of organized attempts to influence public opinion, is a part of everyday life.
   2. The mass media play such a crucial role that we can say they are the gatekeepers to social movements. Far from providing unbiased reporting, the media are under the control and influence of people who have an agenda.
   3. Sociology sensitizes us to multiple realities; that is, for any single opinion on a given topic, there are competing points of view.
   4. Sociologists have identified five stages in social movements.
      (a) During the first stage, initial unrest and agitation, people are upset about some condition in society and want to change it.
      (b) A crucial factor that enables social movements to make it past the first stage is resource mobilization.
      (c) During the organization stage, a division of labor is set up, and leaders make policy decisions; the rank and file perform the daily tasks that keep the movement going.
      (d) During institutionalization, the movement has developed a bureaucracy.
      (e) During the decline and death stage, managing the day-to-day affairs of the organization dominates the leadership.
   5. The final stage of decline and death can be postponed for decades and generations, as events breathe new life into a social movement and committed, fresh blood replaces faltering leaders.

V. The Growth Machine versus the Earth

A. The globalization of capitalism underlies today’s environmental decay.
   1. The Most Industrialized Nations continue to push for economic growth, the Industrialized Nations strive to achieve faster economic growth, and the Least Industrialized Nations, anxious to enter the race, push for even faster growth.
   2. If our goal is a sustainable environment, we must stop trashing the earth.

B. Industrialization led to a major assault on the environment. While it has been viewed as good for the nation’s welfare, it has also contributed to today’s environmental problems.
   1. The major polluters of the earth are the Most Industrialized Nations.
   2. As a result of industrialization, much toxic waste has been dumped onto the land and into our oceans and lakes. Nuclear power plants are a unique problem in that the waste they produce remain lethal for thousands of years.
   3. The Industrializing nations, namely China, are also contributors to global pollution. Of the world’s forty most polluted cities, thirty-six are in China.
   4. Fossil fuels produce acid rain which kills animal and plant life.
5. There is an abundant source of natural energy that would provide low-cost power and therefore help raise the living standards of humans across the globe. Better technology is needed to harness this energy supply.

6. Although the rain forests cover just 6 percent of the Earth’s land, they are home to one-half of all the Earth’s plant and animal species. As tropical rain forests are cleared for lumber, farms, and pastures, the consequence may be the extinction of numerous plant and animal species.

C. Concern about the world’s severe environmental problems has produced a worldwide social movement.

1. Political parties, such as the green parties, are formed whose concern is the environment. Activists in the environmental movement seek solutions in education, legislation, and political activism.

2. One concern is environmental injustice—minorities and the poor being the ones who suffer the most from the effects of pollution.

D. Environmental sociology examines the relationship between human societies and the environment. Its basic assumptions include: (1) the physical environment is a significant variable in sociological investigation; (2) humans are but one species among many that are dependent on the environment; (3) because of intricate feedbacks to nature, human actions have many unintended consequences; (4) the world is finite, so there are potential physical limits to economic growth; (5) economic expansion requires increased extraction of resources from the environment; (6) increased extraction of resources leads to ecological problems; (7) these ecological problems place restrictions on economic expansion; (8) the state creates environmental problems by trying to create conditions for the profitable accumulation of capital; and (9) for the welfare of humanity, environmental problems must be solved. The goal is not to stop environmental problems but rather to study how humans affect the physical environment and how that environment affects human activities.

E. If we are to have a world that is worth passing on to the coming generations, we must seek harmony between technology and the natural environment. As a parallel to development of technologies, we must develop systems to reduce technology’s harm to the environment, and mechanisms to enforce rules for the production, use, and disposal of technology.

**KEY TERMS**

*After studying the chapter, review the definition of each of the following terms.*

**alternative social movements:** target individuals and seek to alter some specific behavior (p. 462)

**cultural lag:** Ogburn’s term for human behavior lagging behind technological innovations (p. 456)

**dialectical process of history:** each thesis (a current arrangement of power) contains its own antithesis (contradiction or opposition). A struggle develops between the thesis and its antithesis, leading to a synthesis (a new arrangement of power). This new social order, in turn, becomes a thesis that will be challenged by its own antithesis, and so on. (p. 454)
diffusion: the spread of invention or discovery from one area to another; identified by William Ogburn as one of three processes of social change (p. 455)

discovery: a new way of seeing reality; identified by William Ogburn as one of three processes of social change (p. 455)

ecosabotage: actions taken to sabotage the efforts of people who are thought to be legally harming the environment (p. 473)

environmental injustice: refers to how minorities and the poor are harmed the most by environmental pollution (p. 471)

environmental sociology: a specialty within sociology whose focus is on the relationship between human societies and the environment (p. 474)

global warming: an increase in the earth’s temperature due to the greenhouse effect (p. 470)

invention: the combination of existing elements and materials to form new ones; identified by William Ogburn as the first of three processes of social change (p. 455)

metaformative social movements: movement seeking to change the social order itself—not just of a specific country, but of an entire civilization, or even the whole world (p. 463)

modernization: the transformation of traditional societies into industrial societies (p. 451)

postmodern society: another term for postindustrial society; its chief characteristic is the use of tools that extend the human abilities to gather and analyze information, to communicate, and to travel (p. 457)

proactive social movement: a social movement composed of people who join together to promote social change (p. 461)

propaganda: the presentation of information in an attempt to influence people (p. 463)

public opinion: how people think about a given issue (p. 463)

reactive social movement: a social movement made up of people who feel threatened because some condition of society is changing, and so they are resisting that change (p. 461)

redemptive social movements: movements that target individuals and seek total change (p. 462)

reformative social movements: movements that target society and seek to reform some specific aspect of society (p. 462)

resource mobilization: the means by which a social movement organizes and uses resources—time, money, information, mailing lists, and people skills, even their emotions (p. 465)

social change: a shift in the characteristics of culture and society (p. 450)

social movement organizations: formed by social movements to further their goals (p. 461)

social movements: large numbers of people who are dissatisfied about things, who organize either to promote or to resist social change (p. 461)
**sustainable environment:** a world system that takes into account the limits of the environment, produces enough material goods for everyone’s needs, and leaves a heritage of a sound environment for the next generation (p. 468)

**transformative social movements:** movements that target society and seek to transform the social order itself (p. 462)

**transnational social movements:** seek to change some specific condition that cuts across societies; also called new social movements (p. 463)

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**KEY PEOPLE**

*Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.*

**Karl Marx:** He noted that capitalism set in motion an antagonistic relationship between capitalists and workers that remain today. Marx developed the theory of dialectical materialism. (p. 454)

**Lewis Henry Morgan:** Morgan’s theory of social development once dominated Western thought. He suggested that societies pass through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. (p. 453)

**William Ogburn:** Ogburn identified three processes of social change: invention, discovery, and diffusion. He also coined the term “cultural lag” to describe a situation in which some elements of culture adapt to an invention or discovery more rapidly than others. (pp. 454-456)

**Oswald Spengler:** Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West* in which he proposed that Western civilization was declining. (p. 454)

**Arnold Toynbee:** This historian suggested that each time a civilization successfully meets a challenge, oppositional forces are set up. Eventually, the oppositional forces are set loose and the fabric of society is ripped apart. (p. 454)

**Max Weber:** Weber argued that capitalism grew out of the Protestant Reformation. (pp. 450-451)

**Mayer Zald:** Zald suggested that a cultural crisis can give birth to a wave of social movements. (p. 461)

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**Discussion Topics to Encourage Student Participation**

- After reading Sociology and the New Technology: The Coming Star Wars, have students discuss the following: In the reading it is suggested that “it is one thing to fight an enemy that uses outdated technology, but quite another to face an enemy that possesses similar technology.” Debate the idea of *mutual deterrence*, which is the idea that both nations with high technology fear an attack from the other, so neither of the two attacks for fear of annihilation. Also, have them discuss the idea that the nations with “outdated technology” are more willing to commit
suicide for their cause and are more likely to pose a serious threat. Finally, discuss President Reagan’s dream of Star Wars as a reality.

- Reminding your students of the geopolitical realignment of the world powers since World War II that has resulted in a Japan-centered East, a Germany-centered Europe, and a U.S.-centered Western hemisphere, have your students discuss the following: What most accounts for these three nations’ economic dominance? How did Japan and Germany, devastated after World War II, become the dominant players in Asia and Europe? Of all the nations in the world, why do these three countries, along with Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Russia, get to decide the world’s monetary policies? Should there be such an entity as the G8?

- Noting how Oswald Spengler, some seventy-five years ago, proposed that Western civilization had passed its prime, ask your students to address the following: Do you agree with Spengler’s contention? What occurrences in the last seventy-five years support Spengler’s contention? What occurrences challenge it? As you see it, what constitutes a “civilization on the rise?” What constitutes a “civilization in decline?” Finally, if Western civilization is, indeed, destined to decline and eventually die, what do you imagine will replace it? From where will the next “great empire” come?

- As Karl Marx envisioned the dialectical process, a classless society was to ultimately emerge out of the struggle between capitalists and workers. Thinking about this, ask your students to discuss the following: The Cold War was an ideological war between Marxist–socialist communism versus capitalism. Given the collapse of the former Soviet Union and China’s recently developed free-market economy, would you say that Marx was wrong? Why wasn’t capitalism defeated in the twentieth century? Can capitalism ever be defeated? Should it be?

- Ask your students to consider whether any country has an exclusive right to knowledge and/or science. Can a single nation or, for that matter, a small group of nations, stop scientific progress in other nations? On what moral and/or legal grounds can they inhibit or prohibit other countries from developing new technologies that can challenge their monopoly on these technologies? In short, shouldn’t all nations, no matter how rich or poor, have the same rights to technologically advance themselves? If not, why not?

**Classroom Activities and Student Projects**

- Ask your students to imagine and write about what would happen if, starting tomorrow, all cars were banned in the United States. How would the elimination of the automobile affect social, cultural, and economic arrangements in American society? What adjustments would Americans have to make to effectively function in an “automobile-free” society? If forced, could Americans make such adjustments? What would you personally have to give up and/or change about your lifestyle to live in an “automobile-free” society? If you had to, could you make such adjustments? Finally, in which ways, if any, do think that American society and/or you would be better off without the automobile? In which ways, would society and/or you be
worse off? After your students complete the assignment, have them exchange their papers with one another and discuss and/or debate their conclusions.

- Break your students into small groups and have them think about and discuss the following: How did the technological invention of television change the way people in the United States organize themselves? How did it transform the nation’s ideologies and values? Finally, how did it reshape the following social relationships in the United States: between family members, between men and women, and between whites and nonwhites? Afterwards, have a spokesperson from each group present their group’s conclusions to the class.

- Assign the following task to your students: Pick any 24-hour period sometime within the next four weeks and go unplugged. Do not use any electricity whatsoever. Among other things, this means no lights, television, radio, air conditioning, car, elevator, telephone, computer, refrigerator, microwave, or stove. During this 24-hour period, keep a detailed journal on all that you are doing to cope with the loss of your electronic “necessities,” including the adjustments and/or improvisations you are making to “survive” and how you are feeling about being forced to make these adjustments and/or improvisations. Afterward, reflect upon and write about how dependent you are on electricity. Discuss what you missed most during your 24 hours without electricity. Consider how you would fare if a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or an earthquake, forced you to go without electricity for weeks instead of a single day.

- If most of the Least Industrialized Nations developed and/or gained access to weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear bombs, how might that change the balance of power between the Most Industrialized Nations and the Least Industrialized Nations? Ultimately, would there be greater or lesser economic equality between the Most Industrialized Nations and the Least Industrialized Nations if the technological gap between them were greatly diminished? What dangers might a nuclear-armed North Korea or Iran pose for the United States or, for that matter, the world? Finally, regardless of these dangers, what right does the United States have to tell these nations and others like them that they cannot have what the United States has? Does it have a right? If no, why not? If so, why?

Service Learning Projects and Field Trips

- Arrange for the class to tour a recycling center where they can observe the types and amounts of materials that are now being recycled. The tour should include a presentation from someone associated with the center explaining its function and providing a history of recycling. The emphasis should be the center toured and the municipalities that it serves. After the tour, have the class engage in a discussion that focuses on the massive undertaking that recycling represents. What would happen to the millions of tons of recycled products if not for recycling programs? What products not featured at the recycling center tour can also be recycled? Why is it important for each person to do their part in recycling?
Select a committee of students to assess the university’s recycling efforts. Does the university have a recycling program? If so, how well publicized is it? Is it followed by faculty, staff, and students? In the absence of a recycling program, make it a class project to design one. Plan to publicize class efforts through the school newspaper, school radio station, fliers, and posters. Find a way to measure the amount and types of material the class is responsible for recycling in the specified time period of the project. Develop a formula to estimate what this effort would mean if recycling were practiced on a state or national scale based on the success of the class project.

As a class project, have your students produce a thirty- to sixty-minute videotaped documentary of the pollution and/or environmental abuse they can find on campus and/or in their community. The documentary should include a running, narrative commentary, as well as some structured interviews with different people on campus and/or in the community regarding their feelings about the environment. Encourage your students to be as creative as possible in framing and presenting the issues, and in uncovering and exposing the abuse. Once the project is completed, have your class present the documentary to the college community, along with a panel discussion about what can and should be done to better protect and promote the environment.

Suggested Films

*Fantastic Voyage*. 1966, 100 min. (Video).
A science fiction theater film that raises important questions about medical technology.

*Journey to Planet Earth: The Urban Explosion*. PBS. 2009, 57 min. (DVD).
Investigates four mega-cities (Mexico City, Istanbul, Shanghai, and New York City) and whether urban populations can be maintained without destroying the environment.

This video examines the relationship between work and personal dignity.