**Social Change: Definition, Characteristics, Causes, Types, and Examples**

**social change**, in [sociology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sociology), the alteration of mechanisms within the [social structure](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-structure), characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organizations, or value systems.

**Meaning of Social Change:**

When change in social structure, social order, social values, certain customs and traditions, socio- cultural norms, code of conduct, way of conducting oneself in the society, standards, attitudes, customs and traditions of the society and related factors take place, it is said that there is social change.

When there is social change, the process of socialization also changes accordingly. The individual who is an active member of the society becomes an agent and target of social change. He brings social changes and also is influenced by such changes.

In a particular period people of the society are guided by certain rules and regulations, customs, traditions values and beliefs, the way every one has to manage and guide himself, people have to manage their style of living, their work, business, profession and conduct. Individuals of the society, young and old are guided by these rules and belief.

**Type of Social Change:**

**From the ensuing discussion it appears that social change can be categorized to two types:**

(1) Evolutionary Social Change

(2) Revolutionary Social Change.

**(1) Evolutionary Social Changes:**

Evolutionary changes occur in course of a long period slowly and gradually and through evolutionary process. Such changes are not very drastic or remarkable. They proceed gradually like the process of conditioning and people learn to adjust with such changes gradually.

**2) Revolutionary Changes:**

It is the opposite of evolutionary change. When the changes in various sectors of our social system occur suddenly, drastically and sufficiently so as to differentiate it from gradual, slow change, it is called revolutionary social change.

The change in other words is great in degree, remarkable. The changes are such that they change the whole social order and the course or style of living, conduct and concept of do’s and don’ts. They are a matter of kind which occur due to some movement, revolution war, rapid technological changes, due to sudden change in social events.

They occur very quickly and within a short period or short duration. Let us take some examples. The changes in social structure and social system which occurred after various famous revolutions like the French, the Russian, the Chinese and the American Revolution and more recently the revolutionary changes that occurred or are still occurring in various Afro-Asian countries occur due to revolutions and movements India’s freedom movement or revolution for independence from ‘British Raj’ is a case of revolutionary movement.

**Characteristics of Social Change:**

When either evolutionary or revolutionary changes take place in the social system one lives,, observable changes take place in the social values, customs, traditions, cultural heritage, age old beliefs, style of living, dress, attitude, superstitions stereotype, way of conducting oneself in the society, process of socialization and overall behaviour of its members.

**Factors Influencing Social Change:**

Social change do not occur automatically. Certain factors do influence social change.

**They are discussed below briefly:**

**(i) Social Movement and Social Revolution:**

Pages of world history records several important social movements and revolutions such as French revolution, American revolution, Russian revolution, Chinese revolution and so on.

A social movement originates when either people are discontent and unhappy with the existing social system or social order, when people try to establish a new order of life or a new style of living or when the social system is established in a condition of unrest.

Humans are social beings. We exist in a social world and observe norms, rules and traditions that are all social constructs. Therefore social change is a concept that is threaded to the very root of society. Similar to the Earth completing a strenuous rotation around the Sun every year, society undergoes social change. It shapes and shifts how we perceive the world and its social interactions. Comparing society from the 19th century to the current 21st will present itself with drastic changes. For starters, women’s rights was a concept a majority of men refused to believe in and blatant racism towards people of colour was an accepted part of one’s daily routine. Social change is what has brought about so many alterations to the functioning of society.

**What does Social Change mean?**

According to sociologists, social change is a constantly occurring phenomenon. It is the process through which [social structures](https://www.sociologygroup.com/social-structure/) and institutions are reconstructed, undergoing a cultural transformation. Society is built upon certain value systems that maintain social order and shifts in the root of these value systems- human interaction- lead to the disruption of the maintained social order. Disruption is always acquainted with negativity, however, as society is constantly developing and innovating, change and disruption is not only inevitable but needed. Social change can result in positive or negative outcomes.

According to M. E Jones, social change occurs when social processes, social patterns, social interactions or social organisations encounter modifications from their everyday functioning. [Marx,](https://www.sociologygroup.com/karlmarx-history-works/)on the other hand, looked at social change as the consequence of class struggle- the conflict was the primary means for change. He believes that the economy is the most significant causing factor for change. Many sociologists have correlated the relationship between technology and social change. In earlier years, societies were largely nomadic and depended on manual human labour to hunt and gather for food on a daily basis. As humans evolved and built contraptions that eased the process of cultivation and agricultural production, societies began to claim land and mark territories. Lenski believed that these technological advancements are what caused societies to shift, and it is possible to observe how technological advancements affect the very thread of society to this day.

Theories of Change

Classical and early modernists focused their narratives on social change on the stability aspect rather than change. Change is planned and is introduced to bring stability to society. Modernists theorists, on the other hand, view social change as a result of changes in the environment and other external factors. Symbolic interpretivists believe that social interaction creates social structures and leads to the alteration of existing and new structures. Postmodernists tend to reject the idea of describing social structures as definable entities and see social change as a response to the present discourse.

**Characteristics of Social Change**

Inevitable

• As mentioned earlier, social change is a phenomenon tied to the very root of human society, therefore it is inevitable and unavoidable. Social change may take place without society being acutely aware of the process.

Ubiquitous

• Social change is not a concept tied down to one society, it is not unique to particular geographical locations or subsets of society but occurs across all societies. No society remains static and unchanging, micro and macro events take place to shift the way they function. Therefore it must be looked at as a universal phenomenon.

Multi-leveled

• As discussed above, change occurs both on a micro and macro level. Certain definitions of social change look at the concept to understand how social structures evolve and introduce new social institutions. However, social change takes place on all levels and is not restricted to evolutionary change.

Contagious

• Especially in the present day, given how interwoven and connected one society is with another, social change is contagious in the sense that change in one society can inflict change in another.

Rate

• There is no fixed time duration during which social change occurs, its rate depends on this issue at hand and can be rapid or gradual [revolutionary or evolutionary].

Measurable

• This is perhaps the most important characteristic of social change. Social change can be measured and detected based on scale, brevity and repetition.

**Causes**

There are various reasons why societies undergo social change. Change can be brought about due to technological developments, social institutions, social conflict or the environment. These factors can be viewed as the agents of social change. Technology has become an integral part of society ever since the late 19th century and human dependence on technological development is only growing. It is no surprise that technology can be a reason for social change. Technology can be argued to be the bridge that allows us to exist in such an interconnected world, it acted as the thrust for globalization. Without the internet and the introduction of cellular phones and digital devices, we would not have a hybrid global society.

Advancements in technology also led to the improvement of the medical and agricultural world, both of which have multitudes of benefits. High-tech medical equipment now makes it easier for doctors to treat critically ill patients and have also eased the process of childbirth, greatly reducing the number of deaths during childbirth. The development of large agricultural fields and equipment have made it easier to grow to produce in bulk for commercial purposes. Food scientists are also finding ways to create hybrid fruits and vegetables which are packed with nutrients. The impact of technology extends towards culture as well. Different cultures come into contact with and influence each other. Globalization is a key example of how technology has brought about cultural change.

However, it is important to observe how technology has created a digital divide and is furthering the inequalities faced by marginalised and underprivileged sections of society. Those with access to the internet and digital resources can arm themselves with information while the rest are left to their own devices or a lack of one.

Social institutions are organised systems within society that follow certain social rules and norms. Social change can affect social institutions just as the reverse- social institutions triggering social change- takes place. Industrialisation is an example of how social change affected social institutions. Previously the family, being a large unit, would take care of agriculture, education and so on. However, as industrialisation progressed, families broke into smaller units and social institutions such as schools and industries began to take up their roles.

Natural disasters can uproot societies and it takes a while to build them back to what it was before. These disasters also highlight the importance of environmental activism and urge individuals to show more care and support to the land they live in. Activists such as Greta Thunberg have immensely contributed to creating awareness of environmentalism. It has put large organisations and industries under the spotlight and expose how the present way of functioning is causing immense damage to the earth. It has also led to smaller changes such as switching from plastic bags to cloth bags and plastic straws to metal ones.

Social conflict is perhaps the most easily observable cause for social change and usually results in large-scale protests and public demonstrations. With the help of the internet, social change exists and can be executed in the digital world as well. Social conflict can occur due to class-based struggles, gender issues, racism and ethnic discrimination. It all highlights how the majority is in dominance and exploits and harasses the marginalised. Wars are major events that are discussed when talking about social conflicts in the past.

Types and examples of social change

This can be compartmentalized into two categories: evolutionary and revolutionary social change. Evolutionary social change refers to those changes that take place gradually and over a long period of time. Most often we do not recognise the change taking place because at that point in time it is not very significant or observable. For example, the shift from agrarian societies to industrial ones did not take place within a short period of time, it took gradual processes and time for society to completely shift to one that is based around industrial jobs. Even today, in the 21st century, there are still third-world countries and underdeveloped areas where industrialisation has not entirely hit. Another example of an evolutionary change would be regarding women’s rights. It took a long and arduous fight to bring women to where they are now in terms of politics, social and financial standing. We did not earn the right to vote and own property over a few months of protest. It was a slow and gradual process and although the steps taken at the time were dramatic and significant, it was similar to pushing an iron boulder up a hill as no immediate changes were being made. Similarly, the LGBTQ communities have been fighting for trans and gay rights for a long time now and it is only recently that laws have been passed

Revolutionary change, on the other hand, occurs like rapid-fire and its results can be viewed over a short period of time. These kinds of changes are more present today in the digital world because of how accessible news and platforms to share information are. The Arab Spring is an example of revolutionary change. It began in 2010 and the movement lasted till 2013. The Arab Spring is a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and demonstrations that fought and challenged authoritarian regimes. It began in Tunisia and spread to almost every Arab nation and it can be argued to have caused the most significant change in the middle east since it was decolonized. The MeToo movement is another social movement that brought about a revolutionary change as it led to bills and laws being passed to be more stringent about the persecution of harassers on-site. Similarly, the BLM caused an international uproar and demanded those who were guilty of committing such treacherous acts of racism be punished.

Change can manifest as a positive or negative reaction depending on the context. As mentioned earlier, technological advancements have brought about immense development but at the same time, has created a vast digital divide. It is important to look at social change from a holistic perspective and understand how social change can occur at a micro-and macro-level simultaneously. Change is inevitable so it would be futile to halt the process. Moreover, with how fast-paced the 21st century is, change is required. This ensures that social institutions and structures are kept in check and help with the growth of society and all its people.