SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY

HOW SOCIETIES CHANGE

DANIEL CHIROT

Sociology for a New Century

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How Societies Change

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Contents

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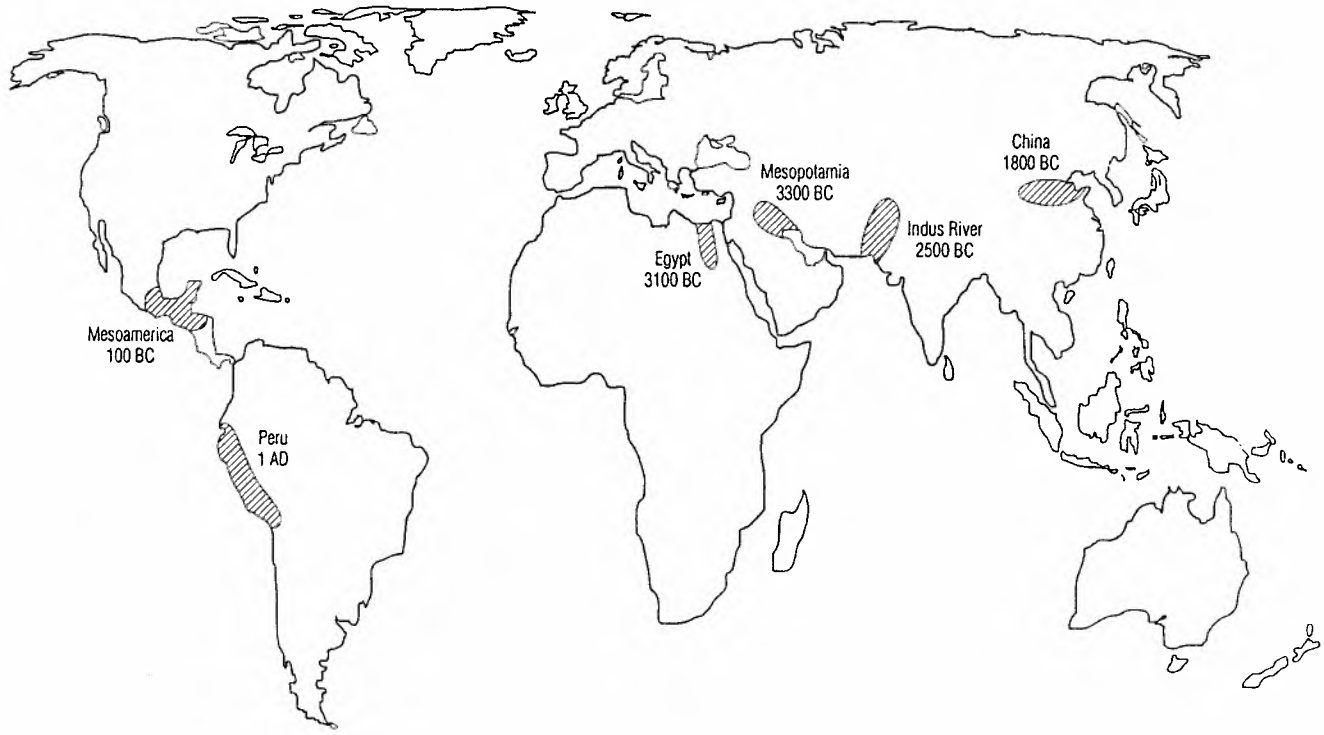
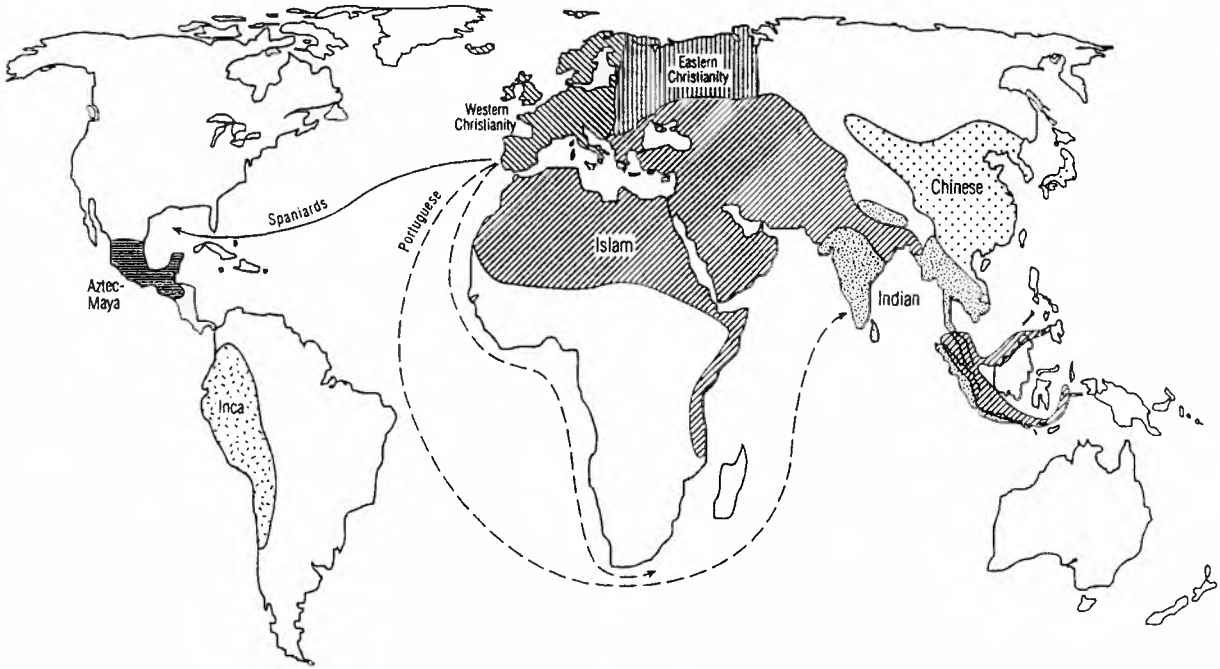


The First Agrarian State Civilizations With
Approximate Dates of Origin



The Major Agrarian Civilizations
in About 1500 A.D.

Foreword

Sociology for a New Century offers the best of current sociological thinking for today's students. The goal of the series is to prepare students, and—in the long run—the informed public, for a world that has changed dramatically in the last three decades and one that continues to astonish.

This goal reflects important changes that have taken place in sociology. The discipline has become broader in orientation, with an ever growing interest in research that is comparative, historical, or transnational in orientation. Sociologists are less focused on "American" society as the pinnacle of human achievement and more sensitive to global processes and trends. They also have become less insulated from surrounding social forces. In the late 1970s and 1980s sociologists were so obsessed with constructing a science of society that they saw impenetrability as a sign of success. Today, there is a greater effort to connect sociology to the ongoing concerns and experiences of the informed public.

Each book in this series offers in some way a comparative, historical, transnational, or global perspective to help broaden students' vision. This volume does so very explicitly by describing how societies have changed over the past five thousand years. Responding to ecological pressures, to competition between and within societies, to demographic growth, and to the immense increase in our knowledge about how natural and social forces affect us, social structures have been altered almost beyond recognition since the invention of the earliest agrarian states. Yet, the same forces that produced change then remain present today. Some of the social forms developed to cope with repeated episodes of overcrowding, war, and inequality have failed catastrophically and produced social disasters. Others that succeeded for a time, even for a very long time, have eventually become obsolete and been overcome by further change. The search for a balance between the need to retain old and tested ways of social organization that work and finding new solutions that might be better, but that do not plunge us into unforeseen disasters remains the key

problem of all societies in our industrial era as it was in the agrarian one that preceded us.

This book teaches students that even though their society is beset by difficulties that seem both new and unique, in fact many are both global and repetitions, in new forms, of challenges that have existed in the past as well. At the same time, the book is meant to show that even today we are never sure what new solutions will work, and which ones will make certain problems even worse. Though there are no final answers, the better informed an individual is about the ways in which societies change, the more likely it is that this individual will understand how to evaluate proposals for solutions to contemporary, pressing social problems.

Preface

To speak about how and why societies change is to wander into issues from the most trivial and minute to the most deeply philosophical and abstract. Why do hair styles change from one generation to the next? Why were fewer children in the United States named Robert or Mary in the 1980s than in the 1940s? Why are Japanese or French children more polite, on average, than American ones? Why did the ancient Egyptians not become monotheists like their neighbors in Israel several thousand years ago? Is the fact that Celtic speakers used to inhabit most of western and central Europe but now live only in a few fringes on the European Atlantic coastline meaningful, and if so, what does it tell us about how societies change? Does the difference between family patterns in Africa and China account for the great differences that exist between these two parts of the world?

As it happens, all of these questions, from the most profound, such as those concerning issues of religious meaning and fundamental social survival, to the most trivial, such as the one about hair styles, are of some interest. I am sorry to warn the reader that I am not going to answer any of them in this book. I do, however, hope to give the reader a useful way of thinking about such problems.

The framework for the study of social change presented in this book will be based on a few evolutionary principles. I shall emphasize the fact that societies have to adapt to changing conditions, and that some forms of change help, whereas others impede survival. By looking at the major sorts of change that have taken place over the past five thousand years since the invention of the state, I am going to illustrate the basic model with which I am working. Needless to say, this approach precludes the detailed examination of any single society.

After explaining how states and agriculture created what we have come to know as the classical civilizations, I shall spend some time showing why in one somewhat marginal agrarian civilization, in western Europe, there were changes so great that they transformed Europe and

then the entire world, ending the agrarian age and bringing us into the industrial era.

Then I shall explore the essential features of modern industrial societies in the past two centuries that came out of that great European transformation. Although industrial societies have been a great success, they have created a set of recurring and as yet unsolved problems. These are a major impetus for further social change, and no student of how societies change can afford to ignore them.

Finally, I shall make explicit a simplified model of how societies as a whole work and how to approach the study of contemporary social change in the most useful, comparative, and historical way. I shall close by pointing out a few of the major dilemmas and paradoxes of modern society and by asking what, if anything at all, the study of social change can contribute to the resolution of our most important problems.

Throughout the book my approach is what social scientists call *macro-* as opposed to *micro-* scopic. That is, I am only looking at the ways in which big political structures, major ideas, and the most important ecological and social pressures have changed societies. To be sure, in order to discuss macroscopic change, it is necessary to have in mind certain assumptions about how individuals behave. I believe that our ordinary notions about how most people try to survive, to obtain some pleasure, to socialize, to reproduce, and to find some meaning in what they do work very well to account for why societies hold together and continue to exist. Neither basic human physiology nor psychology has changed much in this respect for tens of thousands of years.

What has changed, however, and what this book discusses is why, despite the essential psychological and biological similarity of humans today and those of, say, twenty thousand years ago, almost all aspects of our lives except for our basic physical functions are so different, and why, despite the basic similarity of all human beings on earth today (we are all one species and interbreed perfectly well) there are such huge differences in economic, social, and political behavior. I am convinced that getting a bit closer to an answer to this question is one of the main purposes of studying social change. Those with a wide range of historical and comparative facts at their command can begin to explain why there are such differences and why societies evolve in different ways. They can objectively examine what new ideas work best as societies continue to adapt and change, and this is better than relying on pure ideology or prejudice.

Traveling around the globe and across five thousand years to visit people as different from each other as twentieth-century but prestate highland warriors in New Guinea, pyramid-building ancient Egyptians,

Imperial Chinese bureaucrats from the Ming dynasty, seventeenth-century European merchants, and contemporary Americans may seem daunting. To try this in so few pages may appear foolhardy. But when all this information is connected and fitted into a comprehensible model of how and why societies change, it makes sense. Furthermore, there is no other way to begin thinking about what all human societies have in common and what distinguishes them from each other. Even for those who are interested primarily in contemporary social and political issues, it is impossible to come to intelligent conclusions without knowing what the range of social possibilities has been in the past and in what ways today's problems are the same as or different from those in the past.

This book, then, is meant to get students started in the right way to understand their society by comparing it to others, both contemporary and historical. It tries to convey the crucial fact that change is not just something that happened in the past, but that it will continue, and that it is necessary to evaluate social transformations as they occur because not all of them yield positive results. While addressing these questions, the book also seeks to broaden somewhat the knowledge that students have about the many types of human societies that have existed. I hope that this short book will make some of its readers curious and inspire them to learn more of this fascinating and important history on their own.

Acknowledgments

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1

Evolution and Early Human Societies

In order to study social change it is necessary to begin with some notions about the causes and general nature of such change. This requires some comparisons between physical, genetic evolution and changes in human ideas, knowledge, and institutions. That, in turn, demands a brief perspective on events that occurred long before written history existed. Only after this will it be possible, in the second chapter, to begin with a short history of social change in the past five thousand years.

Physical and Cultural Evolution: Differences and Similarities

For at least five million years, or perhaps longer, depending on how "human being" is defined, there have been intelligent primates on earth who were evolving into the species homo sapiens. It was, however, only some forty or so thousand years ago that anatomically modern homo sapiens, humans who were physically just like us, entirely replaced older types of humanoids.

Though there continue to be scientific controversies about the origin and evolution of modern humans, the basic facts are established. We evolved from apelike creatures, probably in eastern Africa. It is thought that it was in southern or eastern Africa, somewhat over 100,000 years ago, that fully modern homo sapiens first appeared. From there we spread out to the other parts of the world. As with all living things, competition within the species for food and mates, competition from other species, and the pressures of changing climates favored those with certain physical and mental characteristics and not others.

There are no single solutions to survival. Some species—sharks or cockroaches, for example—find environments in which they can survive and reproduce for millions of years without much change. (Such environments to which organisms adapt are called *niches*.) Other species are subjected to critical challenges that kill so many that the species is extinguished, except, perhaps, for a favored few who are a little quicker

or a little smarter, or who happen by pure chance to have slightly better insulation, or more offspring, or any of countless useful traits. It is in no way obvious that what we as humans consider "advanced" traits always ensure survival. Neither the sponges that inhabit the oceans nor earthworms would strike most of us as particularly interesting or clever creatures, yet they survive pretty much as their ancestors did tens or hundreds of millions of years ago, and they are wonders of biological adaptation who have occupied secure niches on earth.

Evolution is a combination of probabilities, and from our human, subjective point of view, it works in a cruel way. Those who have genetic—that is, inheritable—characteristics that are useful will, on average, survive and reproduce more successfully than others. Mutations of genes that produce inheritable differences are random and generally harmful. But some mutations turn out to be useful, and individuals who have such useful traits are more likely to pass them on to their offspring than individuals who succumb because they lack such a trait. The more intense the pressures from the environment and the greater the competition for survival, the more likely it is that rapid evolutionary change will occur.

Evolutionary biologists used to think that evolution was a fairly smooth, continuous process. More recent evidence suggests it is not. For example, it is now thought that dinosaurs, which were, in our terms, the most advanced life form on earth for tens of millions of years, died out fairly quickly some sixty million years ago because of a catastrophic change in the earth's environment, due, perhaps, to the earth's collision with large objects from space or to a sudden rise in volcanic activity, either of which would have raised so much dust in the air as to cool the earth and change the climate. There have been other such periods of colossal and fairly sudden mass extinctions of plants and animals in the past, and these were followed by periods of very rapid (that is, rapid in geological terms) evolutionary change.

The extinction of dinosaurs opened the way for birds, who are probably the direct descendants of some of the dinosaurs, and for mammals, who evolved from earlier reptiles, to flourish. It is not that dinosaurs were poorly adapted to their earth, but that their earth changed. It is not that mammals were more clever, bigger, stronger, or faster, but that they were smaller and less reliant on the kinds of food destroyed by the ecological catastrophe that killed the dinosaurs.

Survival and evolution are not functions of virtue or of anything human beings can recognize as an inevitable march toward some kind of perfect being. There is no guarantee that in the future humans will

survive longer than certain insects or microscopic creatures. We may not. The most adaptable and secure form of life may not turn out to be us.

It was the recognition of this startling and ultimately terribly frightening fact that made Charles Darwin's writings instantly controversial after the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life.* Just as earlier the Copernican revolution in astronomy, which proved that the earth turned around the sun and was therefore not at the center of the universe, was deeply disturbing to humans, so was Darwin's discovery of how evolution worked. People want to feel that they are the most important part of the universe, grander and more meaningful than cockroaches, apes, or ferns.

For all of recorded human history, which only goes back some five thousand years, and perhaps long before that, humans have thought of themselves as vastly superior to all other creatures. In historical times elaborate theologies were worked out claiming that we were favored by the supernatural lords of the universe whose special children and objects of attention we were. If there is a single fact that distinguishes the modern age from the past, it is this awful awareness that we are mortal as a species, not just as individuals, and that we have no special protection from the forces of nature. Most people do not accept this even today, but the knowledge is available and it takes ever greater capacities for denial to refuse its implications.

Nevertheless, modern humans do have some special traits that distinguish them from all other species of animals. At some time our distant ancestors acquired the ability to communicate and store knowledge and so pass it on to their offspring. Clearly other mammals, birds, and perhaps even some other animals can do this to some extent. But their ability to store knowledge and pass it on is limited, whereas humans' ability to do this continues to expand and no limit is in sight. The ability to teach young how to survive gives them an advantage they would not otherwise have. The ability to learn new technologies and pass them on, and the consequent continual increase in humans' ability to manipulate the natural environment, has made us what we are today: the dangerous masters of the world, able to perform miracles, but also capable of destroying much of the earth.

At least since the time that fully modern humans have existed, cultural evolution has changed the ways in which humans live far more than physical evolution. There is no reason to doubt that physical evolution continues, but it takes many generations for even small changes to become noticeable. There is no evidence that physical evolution takes

place any more quickly now than in the distant past, and as far as humans are concerned, significant evolutionary changes take place over tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years. Compared to this, the speed of cultural change is almost incomparably greater, and it continues to accelerate. Our ancestors who died in, say, 1890 would not believe their eyes if they were resurrected and placed in O'Hare Airport in Chicago. But then, few young people in 1940 could have imagined that in their lifetimes technology or social mores would change so much, and not many of us alive today can confidently predict how our great grandchildren will live.

Culture, in the sense being used here, refers simply to the store of knowledge any society possesses. It might be considered analogous to the genetic code carried in our cells that determines our physical structure. The ideas that make up a culture contain the "codes" or "blueprints" according to which societies perform their economic activities, make decisions, and organize their interactions among themselves. Cultures also encompass the means of communication: languages, arts, and ways of expressing feelings that people use with each other. Finally, it is within cultures that we find the thoughts that people have about the meaning of their lives as well as interpretations of the social and physical universe in which we all live. There is no way of knowing whether any other animals speculate about why they live and die, or about the meaning of the universe. We do know that all human societies spend a great deal of time thinking about such problems, and some of the answers they come up with have a strong influence on their social institutions. This is the part of culture that helps us decide how satisfactory or unsatisfactory our lives may be, and thus what we would like to change.

From this it is quite clear that any comparison of cultures to genetic codes is merely an analogy. Genes do not sit around wondering why they exist, and they are not able to change themselves by will. Even though cultures are sometimes surprisingly resistant to change and are in no case infinitely plastic, they do respond to changing circumstances and discontent. Even within a single lifetime people can learn new ways. Yet the analogy between genetic and cultural evolution is worth keeping in mind, because similar pressures cause both. It is just that the process and rate of change are vastly different.

This is a cumbersome way of stating the obvious. Humans can learn from their experience, but genes cannot. We are conscious of our cultural memories, of our knowledge, and we can choose to use or discard what we know.

This is not to deny that our understanding of our experiences is often so poor that changes in cultures, and in what is passed on or not, are practically as random as the ways in which genetic mutations and evolution occur. Thus it is only by hindsight that we can tell what cultural changes turned out to be adaptive or maladaptive in the past, and current debates about how we should adapt show that we may not be all that much wiser about how to conduct change than our ancestors. In actual practice, cultural evolution works in as cruel and random a way as physical evolution. There are survivors and failures, and for individuals in those cultures that fail, the price may range from gentle absorption into other cultures to very severe suffering and widespread premature death.

Cultural change (which is just a broader way of saying social change) was not always as rapid as it is today. It used to be that most people lived pretty much the way their parents had lived. For example, from the time of the great pyramids in Egypt, built forty-seven hundred years ago, to the time of Cleopatra, a bit over two thousand years ago, the pace of change was so slow that few people in Egypt were aware of it. During that time there were significant advances in metallurgy, agriculture, ship building, astronomy, mathematics, statecraft, historiography, and much more. But most Egyptian peasants in the Nile valley and delta were largely ignorant of these changes; for them life continued much as it was hundreds, even thousands of years before.

In the past five hundred years, however, and especially in the last two hundred, technologies, social organizations, and cultures started to change so quickly that ordinary individuals in the most rapidly changing countries began to perceive how this was taking place in their own lifetimes. Now it is commonplace to think that change can be measured in decades rather than centuries or millennia, and there are hardly any people left in the world who do not know this.

Some indication of the increasing rate of social change can be gauged by looking at the numbers of people alive at any one time and the speed of population growth. Up to the fifth millennium B.C. (between 5000 B.C. and 4000 B.C.) it probably took at least fifteen thousand years for the human population to triple. There were no more than about five to seven million human beings alive just before agrarian societies were invented in the fourth millennium B.C. Then because of this invention the population started to increase much faster, reaching between one hundred and fifty and two hundred million at about the time of Christ. This means, very roughly, that it tripled every fifteen hundred years. The rate of growth after that seems to have slowed a bit. By the year 1500 there were

some four hundred million humans. But then a new era began, and with it a whole set of rapid changes that allowed population growth to accelerate again. In the twentieth century the population has more than tripled in less than one hundred years. Although no one believes that this rate of increase can continue much longer, what has happened to population obviously reflects major social and technological changes: control of many epidemic diseases, huge increases in our capacity to grow and transport food, and great increases in our general level of well-being. Despite all the images we have of starvation and human tragedy in the world today, almost all of it is caused by political problems rather than by our inability to provide enough for ourselves. The average standard of living of human beings is much higher than in the past, and this is what has allowed us to live longer and reproduce more successfully.

The growth of population can also serve as a shorthand way of reminding us that human social change does not occur in isolation. It has an effect on the environment and may, in the long run, prove to be highly dysfunctional for the survival of the species, as well as destructive of many forms of plant and nonhuman animal life. Increasing population pressure may cause some societies to lower their birth rates, as has already happened. Will it be those societies that reproduce at a lower rate who will turn out to survive best, in marked contrast to most of human history when those who reproduced most had the best chance of long-term survival? Can some societies thrive while others do not? Will population pressure destroy humanity and much of the earth? Will there be adaptation to this new threat, as there has been cultural adaptation to past problems of human survival? The truth of the matter is that taking a problem like population size shows how all aspects of social change are related and how these are in turn related to other forms of life on earth and to the earth's future in general. It also shows how difficult it is to come to final answers about the meaning and long-term consequences of change, or to be certain about the direction in which we ought to change in order to survive better. And now, as before, the risks of maladaptive cultural change are substantial: Serious mistakes can be as fatal now as they were in the past, but on an even larger scale.

This fact has very serious implications that few of us are willing to recognize. It means that certain social habits and institutions to which we are attached may be harmful in the long run, even if they were beneficial in the past. Some changes that we might wish to make could produce more harm than good, and others that we may not like may be necessary, so that societies who make them are more likely to be successful. As in the case of biological traits, vast numbers of social institutions are neither