

## Social Change

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Citation:

Wagoner, B. & Power, S.A. (2021). Social Change. In Vlad Glaveanu (Eds). *Encyclopedia of the Possible*. Palgrave. London.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98390-5\\_143-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98390-5_143-1)

**Definition:** Social change describes the transformations of a society in terms of values systems, social organization, and practices. What may appear a radical idea at one moment in history can become a taken for granted norm at another. Woman's suffrage, civil rights, and environmental concern are all powerful 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of this. The same might be said for the normalization of new technologies, such as the internet, smart phones and AI. The prototype of dramatic social change is the French revolution, which aimed to create a sharp break with traditional society and socially engineered a new one based on the enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet its ultimate failure to uphold its values and achieve the strived for society demonstrates some of the inherent limitations to radical social change. Social change often coincides with, and is driven by the idea of, a possible future society different from the current one—in other words, an awareness of the difference between the actual and the possible opens up. This can happen when we are confronted with other societies' ways of doing things, a minority that persistently communicates an alternative view of reality, and more specifically social movements' imaginations of alternative futures and motivation to actualize them. Whether efforts to bring about social change are successful depends on both power and moral vision—if it is effectively communicated and connects up with the public's values.

Keywords: Social influence, protest movements, cultural contact, Arab Spring, imagination, moral psychology

## Contact drives change

One of the most obvious drivers of social change is the contact of groups, especially those with vastly different ideas, values, practices, and technology. Such contact brings to the fore the *possibility* of other modes of believing and acting, as well as material artifacts and technology. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century school of anthropology called *diffusionism* (which included Rivers, Boas, and Bartlett) emphasized how most social changes were caused by the contact of cultures rather than internal developments within them. Ideas, practices and technologies tended to be taken over by different groups rather than invented anew (see Wagoner, 2017). However, in this process the new tends to be combined with the old, such that it is uniquely placed and adapted in each society. Furthermore, genuinely new ideas and practices can emerge from the synthesis of existing cultural forms. This is also visible in new developments in the arts and sciences within the same society (Bartlett, 1958).

As a result of these processes societies that are in regular contact with others tend to change at a faster pace. Icelandic language for example changed little over centuries because of its relative isolation from other societies—its modern form is much closer to Old Norse than other Scandinavian languages. At a macro level, Jared Diamond (1997) argues that one of the main reasons Columbus sailed to the Americas, and not the reverse, was that the geography of Eurasia provided regular fluid contact between groups, such that innovations in one could easily spread to others. He focuses principally on the diffusion of domesticated plants and animals, technology and germs, but the principle could just as easily be applied to ideas (he does consider the invention of writing).

The 'Colombian exchange' (of plants, animals and germs) that followed the 'discovery' of the Americas also opened up an imaginary world of possibilities. Stories of strange people that tattooed their face and ate human beings flourished, as did people's consciousness of belonging to a distinct culture among other possibilities (Anderson, 1983). Thus, the very contact with other groups can create *reflection* on a group's own belief system and practices, and in a sense relativize them (Shweder, 2017). This can occur by exposure and appropriation of new ideas or practices that develop or even enhance a group. Or, in contrast, it can also lead to reflection based on conflict with, or resistance to, new ideas and practices (Gillespie, 2008). In an increasingly globalized world these processes are accelerating (Geertz, 2012).

This perspective can also be applied to the interactions between groups in the same society. Great innovators are often great synthesizers across the knowledge bases of different groups. Furthermore, the relationship between scientific groups and the lay public has been identified by Moscovici (2000) as a particularly fertile site for the construction of new ideas. He analyzes how new scientific and technological discoveries are collectively elaborated by the public, enriching everyday language and feeding imagination of new possibilities. Moscovici's (1976/2009) classic study looked at how psychoanalysis entered the French public and provided new interpretations of everyday behaviours (e.g., repression, Freudian slip, unconscious), which were nonetheless constructed on the foundation of existing ideas (e.g., Catholic confession's 'talking cure'). To take another example, Einstein's theory of relativity has been generative not only for physics but also popular culture and many different fields of thought. In short,

contact of groups brings into stark relief the possibility of doing things otherwise and thus opens up culture to new developments and imaginations for the future.

### **Minority influence and social change**

Social change often occurs when people are confronted with an idea that ruptures their taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. Suddenly they become all too aware that things could be different. What was earlier unquestioned becomes simply one *possibility* among others, which can require a cognitive effort to re-establish stability. This happens when one encounters unfamiliar or novel ideas and practices but can also be deliberately employed by a minority in order to change the perspective of a majority. Most psychological research on social influence has a 'conformity bias' in that it focuses almost exclusively on how a majority suppresses a minority from publicly expressing their position, thereby sidelining the issue of how the minority can influence the majority, opening up the possibility for social change (Moscovici, 1976). In a famous experiment, Moscovici, Lage and Naffrechoux (1969) demonstrated that minorities could exert influence on a majority by consistently presenting a different perspective on reality. In their experiment, participants had to call out when colored slides were blue or green. The slides were unambiguously blue to most. However, in the experiment a confederate minority (which were 2 out of the 6 in the group) said green. 8% of the real participants began to do so as well.

Minority influence has a deep-seated and private character, in contrast to the public conformity that results from majority influence—in other words, it's about *conversion* rather than *compliance*. Central to this theory is the idea that a minority that communicates with a persistent, consistent and flexible 'behavioral style' creates a *tension* in people that are following the majority opinion. It causes them to look more closely at the minority's perspective, to try to see the world from their point of view. In other words, it can generate reflection on one's own position as being one among other *possibilities*. This tension becomes a 'conversion' through a latent, unconscious process, usually after a 'sleepy effect'. In this way, even an initial active resistance to an idea –as opposed to simply ignoring or outright dismissing it—can be productive of change. In Moscovici et al.'s (1969) original study, participants that called out green in the trials actually showed a *lesser* shift towards calling out green on a color spectrum when compared to those that did not. This can be explained in that by publicly calling out 'green' participants partially released the cognitive tension. Similar processes of intentional influence aimed at social change are often deliberately employed by protest movements.

### **Protest movements as catalysts for change**

One platform on which minorities extend the reach of their communication is through social movements. In particular, protests are a direct way of expressing civil discontent and creating imagery for social change in the form of slogans and pithy formulas. Protests are often triggered by immediate events in the present – comprehended within the collective memory of citizens – but are simultaneously informed by our imaginings of possible futures (Power, 2020b). For example, during a recent protest movement in Ireland people protested during a stark

economic recovery, following an economic recession, when a discrepancy between their expectations of the future did not align with their subjective reality—a timing that would be predicted by relative deprivation theory (Stouffer, et al, 1949; Power, et al, 2020).

The protest was proximately triggered by an introduction of a new charge on water which was seen by some members of Irish society to disproportionately impact working-class households. Similar dynamics can be seen in other protest movements, such as a gas tax triggering the yellow vests movement in France (Jetten, et al, 2020; Shultziner & Kornblit, 2020). Interviews with Irish protesters revealed they were demonstrating because of the charge on water, which was understood within the cultural and historical context of rising inequalities, but was also firmly grounded in people's imaginings of the future (Power, 2018b). Groups of Irish citizens imagined an economic recovery that was relatively equal but this possible world did not manifest which led to a prolonged social movement and ultimately resulted in the abolishment of the water charge (Power, 2018a). One reason for the demonstrable success of this social movement – from the point of view of those who protested- was the prolonged nature of the protest coupled with consistent messages and general widespread support for the clear cause. Another reason is that water acted as a concrete symbol from which to orientate a protest movement (Awad & Wagoner, 2018). Moreover, the irony of having to pay for water in a small island, covered in lakes and rivers, where it frequently rains, was not lost on the demonstrators.

Similarly, the Arab Spring was triggered by the self-immolation of the street vendor Mohammad Bouazizi, who's cart and therefore livelihood was confiscated by a corrupt police officer when he would not give a bribe. The story resonated with a wider public that was experiencing economic inequalities, corruption, and a shared imagination of the perennial continuation of these problems (Awad & Wagoner, 2020). It set off widespread social movements against a continuation of an unfair, corrupt and unequal status quo across the Middle East. Its results, however, have been mixed. Tunisia saw some democratic reforms, while a brief period of meaningful democratic change in Egypt was followed by an even harsher dictatorship than before. This can be explained by a discrepancy between the rate of political change being incongruent with deeper levels of psychological change amongst citizens (Moghaddam & Hendricks, 2020). In Syria, the Arab Spring culminated in a civil war between the government and those fractured groups who oppose them. The backing of both sides by international allies plunged the countries into a decade long conflict, with scores dead, lives altered, and mass migration of those seeking asylum and refuge. Imaginations of possible futures are not real, but their consequences are (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). We also see the gap between the *possible* and its actualization here; reaching the possible is by no means inevitable. Following democratic revolutions societies typically fall back into dictatorship, and even established democracies tend to 'commit suicide' in the long run to quote John Adams (Moghaddam, 2016).

Finally, dystopian imaginings of possible future worlds also motivate protest movements in different domains. This has long been the case with regard to the environmental movement (Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999). The recent youth-led protest movement “#FridaysForFuture” was triggered by

activist Greta Thunberg protest outside Swedish parliament who was dismayed against political inaction to mitigate climate change. This environmental movement spread globally. In neighboring Norway, for example, multi-method research with high-school demonstrators suggests that a violation of shared visions for these youths' future motivated protest in the present to enact impactful socio-political change to curb disastrous climate change and to preserve their preferred possible future (Skauge, Haugestad, Kunst, & Power, in press). Like #FridaysForFuture, Extinction Rebellion and Sunrise Movements have also used apocalyptic imagery of the future and story scripts to press for action. Protestors stage 'die ins' and other means of enacting dystopian futures to fuel the collective imagination for these impending threats. Like the Irish water tax, these devices help to condense complex and dynamic processes into relatable symbols (Awad & Wagoner, 2020).

### **Problems and paradoxes of the possible**

The Arab Spring reveal problems and paradoxes with imaginings of possible futures. First, there are as many possible futures as there are people to imagine them. Making manifest possible futures brings into focus issues concerned with power and representation: who gets to communicate possible worlds? Who has the power to create these possible worlds? Leaders have long known the destabilizing power of alternative ideas for the future. Retaining control is partly a matter of claiming exclusive rights to a narrative for the future. Second, the Arab Spring focused attention on morality and possible worlds. Imagining possible futures opens up space for how future societies *could* be in a descriptive sense. But how these societies *should* be, from a normative perspective, creates problems and paradoxes as well as possibilities.

Reducing economic inequalities, having fairer and less corrupt societies, and ensuring sustainable environments are worthy goals from a progressive point of view. Complexities arise when one comprehends the moral dilemmas, power dynamics, and resistance to forces advocating for these forms of social change. First, is it morally permissible to break the law to create social change? Second, we know people can protest to create social change, but how do authorities respond to demands for social change (Cornish, 2012; Power, 2020a)? And third, when certain individuals and social groups achieve social change that benefits them, to what extent do they advocate for social change that benefits others and to what extent do they now maintain the status quo?

Answers to these three questions lie within the moral domain. Moral pluralism – the heterogeneity of normative viewpoints – defines the splintering of possible worlds (Gray, 2020). In response to the first question above, based on moral viewpoints, breaking the law is morally permissible if the law is deemed unfair, unjust, or illegitimate. Young Egyptians disobeying government laws to protest against the dictatorship is one example. Second, given moral orientations, Egyptians demonstrated on the street to help create space for, and make manifest, a fairer, more just and equal, Egyptian society congruent with how they think it should be. However, this possible world contrasted sharply with those in power who valued the moral, social, and economic order in which they enjoyed the benefits of power. Egyptian protesters were met with harsh military reprisals when they took to the streets. The conflict can be

conceptualized as a clash of moral visions for possible futures. The manifestation of these moral clashes as an open conflict creates the potential for democratic change and the creation of more inclusive and equal societies because the hegemonic power of dictatorial government is challenged which creates the potential for imagining beyond current regimes and to realize these imaginings.

Finally, once social change has occurred for one group (e.g. a law or policy has been introduced that legitimatizes the way of life, or cultural practices of a group, or creates more inclusive, fairer, or more equal societies), whether this group continues to advocate for more social change to extend policies, protections, and possibilities for living the good life for other minorities can also be conceptualized within the moral domain. Achieving social change can fulfill one's moral imagination: possible future worlds have become realities. But social change can also illustrate the limits of one's moral imagination of the possible. Alternative futures can be seen as impossible and therefore not worth striving for. Social change may be followed by the maintenance of the status quo to protect the fruits of this change rather than advocating for new forms of system challenging behaviors. At this point social changes are well-embedded in cultural practices and serve to stable social life against further change.

The generation of social change through protest is rife with problems, paradoxes, but also possibilities. Sculpting future worlds is steeped in issues concerned with morality, power, and representation of others. What is considered to be social change to create a more moral society can be considered immoral by another group. If you have a moral view that values globalism, marked by global trade, open borders and the free-flow of people, and expansive civil liberties, then you are undoubtedly concerned the populist turn against these in recent years. If you have a moral worldview that values nationalism, then one welcomes these protectionist and conservative policies. The recent populist turn illustrates how democracies such as the USA can slide towards dictatorships (Moghaddam, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Social change can occur through cultural contact, minority influence, and social movements. These processes create space for the possibility of future societies. But social change is not always social progress and the notion of progress itself is inherently bound up with different moral visions. There is no inevitable march towards actualizing the possibilities of Enlightenment values (Shweder, 1991). And what is considered social progress from one perspective can be deemed social regression from another perspective. One way to conceptualize these problems of the possible is to comprehend these conflicting divergences through a moral domain. In globalized societies, characterized by cultural and moral splintering, imaginings of how societies could and should be, create space for multiple possibilities. However, social change is often, though not exclusively, dictated by those with power and resources to define the narrative trajectories of these possible worlds. Yet despite the complex challenges faced by those striving for more utopian imaginings of current societies, social change can lead to social progress. Democratic, tolerant, sustainable, inclusive, and equitable societies can be developed from mundane to radical social change.

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### **Cross-references**

Analogy

Difference

Future-orientation

Future making

Imagination

Possible worlds

Power

Revolution

Social representations