

Personal Theory of Social Change
Phil Gyford
1999-09-19

It is often noted (not least by James Gleick in his new book *Faster*) that our world is changing faster and faster as transport improves, global communication becomes easier, populations boom and previously 'untouched' regions of the world come into contact with an increasingly global and less tradition-bound culture. What causes change? Is the rate of change really speeding up? Is it making the world a better place? How much control do we have over how our lives are changing?

Social change can be brought about by many factors, as demonstrated by the variety of theories that attempt to account for it. These explanations (for example, those by Sarkar and Comte) are well researched and thought out and it's beyond the scope of this paper to critique them. However, my initial reaction is admittedly one of skepticism; I find it difficult to believe that one theory could account for all types of society undergoing any kind of change without it being worthlessly vague.

There are huge numbers of factors that affect social change. For example: invasion by a foreign power (whether it's another country or the neighboring village); the introduction of a new religion (such as Christianity to the New World); changing climate; natural disaster; popular culture (from passing on stories to new kinds of music). Each has an affect on the others and while some may have more effect during certain periods than others, all these and more play their part. However, there is one factor which I would pick as a great enabler of change in that it underpins many of the others and increases the effect they can have: technology.

Most drivers of social change would not have the consequences they do without the aid of technological advances: one country or tribe could conquer an enemy with better weapons; the spread of cultural influences happens much faster with the benefit of improved transport and communications; societies can live where nature previously denied them a living with the aid of improved building and farming techniques. Technology not only allows us to accomplish feats previously thought impossible, but also makes it easier and faster to improve technology itself through improved manufacturing methods and allowing ideas to spread faster.

So, is change speeding up? Few could deny that since the industrial revolution society in the First World has changed more than during any other two hundred year period in its history. Each new invention, and each new advance in knowledge, allows us to make progress previously thought unimaginable. From the creation of the steam engine through railroads, electricity, cars, flight and on to computers we have changed our world in a series of dramatic leaps never seen before. Many of these changes have made the world seem smaller and allowed us to spread our influence further and faster, changing countries and cultures which, consequently, it could be said have seen more dramatic changes than our own.

Why is it that the western world appears to have accelerated the pace of change to such an extent it has the power to spread itself around the world? In *Economics Explained*, Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow cite capitalism as being the main driver of technological change, that without a market system there is no incentive to develop change. The primary effect of technological change in daily activity is to increase output... But in a society still regulated by tradition and command, where production was carried on mainly by serfs and slaves and custom-bound artisans, there was little incentive to look for increases in output...

The growing importance of the market, with its impersonal pressures, radically altered the place of technology... Here the free-for-all brought a need to find footholds in the struggle for a livelihood.¹

So, while choosing technology as the major driver of social change we should be aware that, like any other driver, it doesn't spark change on its own. As stated earlier, there

are many factors that play a part. We can see that perhaps the variety of changes in society which helped capitalism take shape have in turn increased the rate of technological change which has itself enabled further changes to take place in other parts of society.

So, is it true that “CHANGE IS GOOD” as *Wired* magazine once screamed on its cover?² Well, no, not necessarily. Because we speak in terms of societies being “advanced” or “underdeveloped” we have a tendency to believe that any changes we make in the name of development must be good. But are tribespeople who have hunted for food for thousands of years (admittedly, far from an easy life) really better off if they move to a shantytown on the edge of a sprawling and polluted city? Were the radical changes introduced by Hitler and Stalin changes for the better? Obviously, far from it.

As the rate of change speeds up thanks to technological advances, is it easier now for people to create social change for themselves? On the one hand, yes, it is. The increasing ubiquity of enabling technologies allows individuals to have more access to ideas and reach more like-minded people. In the information age, an increasing number of ordinary people have ownership of the means of production. On the other hand it could be argued that despite the spread of democracy around the world, people have less direct control over their lives. Technology has allowed a smaller number of people to wield greater amounts of power, from the few people which control vast swathes of the media, to companies who decide which products to manufacture and where to do it.

In summary, we’ve seen that a huge variety of factors drive social change, technology being prominent among them, and that right now our world is changing at a faster rate than ever before, not always for the better.

¹ Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow, *Economics Explained*, pp.18-20, Touchstone Books, 1998.

² *Wired* magazine, January 1998.