

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

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Keywords : Social Development, Globalization, World System Theory, International Governance

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Summary

Since the Second World War a social transition of truly global dimensions has been taking place, which has an impact on almost all forms of life on earth. What seems to be emerging is a highly differentiated, multi-centred, and multi-layered social order of global dimensions, an ecumenopolis which integrates all people of the world.

1. Introduction

Since the Second World War a social transition of truly global dimensions has been taking place. It represents one further stage in the typical process of change, which began in Western Europe in the fourteenth century and since the fifteenth century also expanded to the non-European areas. In contrast to earlier examples of expansion, such as the spread of Islam and Inca culture, the European expansion was accompanied by a process of progressive technical-economic modernization and fundamental social and cultural transformation. At the beginning of the third millennium this process of change appears to have picked up a highly accelerated pace, which has an impact on almost all forms of life and nature on Earth. This global transition has taken the form of a process of uneven development and the perpetuation and exacerbation of spatial inequalities. What seems to be emerging is a highly differentiated, multicentered, and multilayered social order of global dimensions (Massey and Jess, 1995). This essay intends to set out the characteristics of this process of global transition and to indicate the various specific trends of social development involved in it.

For this purpose we will first discuss the ways social development is conceptualized, and then elaborate on the current development trends, respectively the dimensions of economy, culture, and governance, as well as the international, national, and grassroots levels. Finally, a number of conclusions will be drawn.

2. Conceptualizing Social Development

Societies are always in a state of change, be this slowly in a piecemeal fashion or rapidly, even to the extent of being revolutionary. These processes of evolution and revolution have attracted their fair share of scholarly attention in the course of time and nowadays particularly they are considered crucial as the world is felt to have grown increasingly smaller through the use of new means of transport and mass communications. Scientific explanations of social change have varied over time, depending on the views on humankind and society current at the time and following the developments of sociological reasoning. For a large part of the twentieth century two schools of thinking dominated the issue, namely the Marxist approach and modernization theory.

The basic theme in Marxist analysis is a unilinear evolution related to different modes of production. An example is the impressive study of Aidan Southall (1998) on the city in time and space. He specifies four phases in the development of cities in the world, namely the Asiatic mode of production implying the unity of town and country, the ancient mode of production leading to the ruralization of the city, the feudal mode characterized by antagonism between the two, and the capitalist mode of production which implies the urbanization of the countryside. Although Southall is critical of simplistic unilinear theory and introduces many nuances to the crucial transition phases, nevertheless his work may be considered a modern elaboration of the Marxist approach.

Modernization theory, by contrast, has been dominated by dualistic reasoning contrasting one type of society, the “old,” “traditional,” or “rural” one, with another type, the “new,” “modern,” or “urban” one. This approach is exemplified by the classic work of Tönnies (1963, original 1887) contrasting *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The former concept refers to organic, closed, tight forms of community, while the latter covers the rational, individualized, and functional way of characterizing society.

In the 1950s the modernization theory as applied in rural studies transformed into a process approach. It was stressed that the enlargement of scale was becoming a dominant factor. External forces influenced local forms of community leading to higher levels of cosmopolitan attitudes and behavior. On a broader scale, modernization, development, and change became concepts coined for use in the international arena of development cooperation, referring to the relations between rich and poor countries and the “need” for the development of underdeveloped countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, development theory elaborated on these relations between states and evolved into a structural theory of imperialism and a world systems approach.

The impact of increasing international contacts was also formulated by means of two hypotheses, namely convergence and divergence. The case of convergence was based on the idea that “increasing participation by initially differentiated societies in a

common technology, common markets, and a common universe of discourse exerts a powerful generalising and standardising influence” (Hawley, 1971: 294). Hawley considered the case of divergence, with several parallel lines of change resulting in relatively distinct outcomes, less probable. He admitted, however, that at the time of his study, the 1970s, it was difficult to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the ongoing processes of change. In the 1990s world society has evolved considerably. After the abrupt fall of the communist regimes, most of the concepts regarding social transition heavily laden with the ideology of the Cold War era have been severely criticized. They have been supplemented and partially replaced by the discourse on processes of globalization and localization. This globalization discourse, in combination with the theory on the evolving informational and network society, is very useful for grasping contemporary social development trends and even for opening up vistas of future world society far beyond convergence and divergence.

Globalization builds on the world systems theory as a matter of course as it also focuses on the world as a whole. Yet, the advocates of globalization do not find this theory very satisfying, because it is concentrated too much at the level of the state and on the relations between states, without enough recognition being accorded to the transnational aspect of the world system. Moreover, modernization is often perceived as an ideal to be striven for, a connotation that is generally not appreciated by the advocates of globalization, who have an eye for the less desirable effects of this process. One further aspect, which is less appreciated within the globalization approach, is the relative simplicity of the modernization theory, which often uses oppositions to deal with social transformation, as if societies change, for example, from homogeneous to heterogeneous, from traditional to modern, and from integrated to disintegrated. Refuting this simplification, the advocates of the globalization approach stress that modernization is a very complex process in which some people revert to traditional values, integration is sometimes strengthened, the search for identity can become paramount and so on. So, it is not a question of either traditional or modern, but of both traditional and modern; integrated as well as disintegrated and so on (Nas, 1998). The concept of globalization is used in this way to criticize both the world systems and modernization approaches.

The significance of the economic aspects in globalization theory is exemplified by the role perceived for the penetration of the world market in societies all over the world. Both benefits and the losses inherent in this process of commodification are acknowledged. From the point of view of culture, globalization is, however, defined as the generation of a new culture at world level. This “third” culture does not belong to any one nation in particular, but is global in nature. It is the source of localization, as in reaction to the overwhelming and intruding cultural transformation, people re-evaluate local identity. In order to cope with the global the local is emphasized and sometimes even re-created. The cultural approach has brought the element of identity to the fore; this has become one of the most distinctive topics of modern sociology, as proven by the persistence of ethnic strife and conflict in modern society.

The study of Manuel Castells (1998–1999) on the information society can be seen as a further elaboration of the globalization approach. He argues that the most characteristic element of the social transition currently taking place is the penetration of the network

way of organization into every nook and cranny of the whole society, in production, consumption, family, state, politics, warfare, and so on. This will lead to a new phase in societal development, the outlines of which are becoming increasingly clear and in which societies are intertwined on a world scale. However, this globalization, which is especially dominant in the international global financial institutions and transnational enterprises, engenders strong developments at grassroots level, where social movements and the search for local, religious, and ethnic identity predominate. The state and national politics are bifurcated between these tendencies of localization and globalization, but no consensus has been reached among scholars as to whether or not this results in a strengthening or weakening of the state.

These examples of different ways in which social development trends have been perceived in the course of time allow the conclusion that sociological reasoning in this field has been evolving continuously and has reached an intricate cumulative pattern of ideas and concepts. Differences in opinion on phases (two or more), character (evolutionary or revolutionary), mechanisms (class struggle or diffusion of knowledge, technology and social institutions), and end results (convergence or divergence) of social transition have led to a series of cumulative ideas, the full power of which is incorporated in the contemporary discourse on globalization and localization. The current debate is increasingly leading towards the analysis of special trends pointing to the genesis of a new phase in global societal organization. In the next section these trends will be elaborated.

3. Current Trends of Social Development

The global transition currently taking place is part of the specific process of change which started with the European expansion in the fifteenth century. In the course of time it has absorbed more and more peoples and places and inexorably expanded to more and more aspects of human life and nature. In all stages this process has been associated with the emergence of differences between the peoples and places involved, rather than with evenness and uniformity. In the early stages these differences and inequalities were closely related to the widely varied natural, cultural, social, economic, and political conditions existing in the non-European areas concerned. From the sixteenth century, however, after the defeat of the local empires and states and the conquest of vast areas by the Europeans, the inner dynamics of the process gradually gained more weight and increasingly determined its course. The process has reached such a degree of self-propulsion that the global transition currently taking place is based primarily on the pursuit of unequal development as a matter of policy. It is driven by the dynamics and synergism of a technical and economic system based on financial capitalism which has become hypertrophic in a rapidly increasing number of societies: the US, Japan, the European Union, and a number of newly industrialized countries (NICs). The precise outcome of the process of global transition on the different peoples and in the various parts of the world is highly dependent on the structure and organization of the societies concerned and their capacity to achieve the requisite technological and economic modernization and social and cultural transformation. To a high degree these societal processes determine the capability of a nation to join the process of social and economic development and its capacity to tap its resources and profit from it.

The differences and inequalities emerging in the course of the process of global transition between the various peoples and places on the planet manifest themselves in a wide variety of ways. In this article, attention is focused exclusively on the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects. The differences and inequalities with regard to the social aspects of globalization are typically those related to the time–space dimension. As a result of the enormously increased efficiency in transport and communications, the space–time distance between a certain category of peoples and places on the globe has decreased dramatically. At the same time, the space–time distance between other peoples and places has increased relatively. As far as the economic aspects of globalization are concerned, clear differences and inequalities emerge with regard to production. Remarkable in this respect is the predominance of transnational corporations (TNCs). They control and direct a rapidly increasing part of the technical know-how, research for the development of new technologies, the allocation of natural, human and capital resources, and the pattern of living and working of a large section of humankind. In the cultural sphere, trends of convergence and divergence tend to go hand in hand too. On the one hand, modern lifestyles and consumption patterns are being copied by increasingly larger masses of people, cross-cutting societal and continental boundaries. At the same time, however, more and more specific categories and classes of people are tending to distinguish themselves from others through exclusiveness or distinctiveness. In the political field, the most remarkable development consists of the erosion of the nation-state. More and more functions of the nation-state are being taken over by supranational agencies and organizations at one end of the scale, and subnational, regional, or local political–administrative structures on the other. Each of these social development trends will be described in more detail in the following sections.

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Biographical Sketches

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