

# Why Society Change: Anthony Giddens's Structuration Theory and Time-Space Distanciation

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This paper discusses Anthony Giddens' criticism on theories of social change and his attempt to explain social change through structuration theory. Social change theories are theories that seek to explain changes in society based on a single-mechanism criterion, e.g. Marx (Forces of Production), Durkheim (Division of Labor), and Freud-Marcuse (Sexual Repression). The most prominent ones of these are related to evolutionism, which adapt Darwinian concepts to social sciences. As Darwinian evolution charts the progress of less advanced organisms to complex ones (e.g. primate to *homo sapiens*) through adaptation or natural selection, so does social science evolutionism chart the progress of society from tribal communities to advanced nation states. Giddens criticizes these theories because they are too deterministic and that these theories fail to recognize human beings' agency in society. He especially put a special attention on evolutionism in his criticism because of their popularity and influence in social science. He defines evolutionism as a theory of social change related to irreversible progress in society to higher stages based on a given criterion with relation to evolution theory in biology. Human history for Giddens is not a story of evolution like Darwin; he considers it to be more episodic, related to Toynbee's concept of rise and fall of civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Giddens thinks it can be dangerous to think in evolutionary concepts.<sup>2</sup> He said that such theories are flawed in presupposing that social changes are as deterministic and disconnected as evolutionary processes in biology. He commented that such theories are similar to the hubris of thinking social sciences can uncover universal law of human conduct.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the evolution from primate to *homo sapiens*, humans have agency in their history. They are aware of their history and

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 239.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

they have the ability to change their course of history. This is in line with Giddens' theory of structuration that put human agency as part of its core ideas. Despite his criticisms, Giddens does not think that social change cannot be generalized. He provides five concepts related to social change. The difference in Giddens concepts and model compared to evolutionary theories lies in his structuration theory that replaces dualism between agent and structure with duality between them.

This paper is structured into four sections. The first section gives a brief summary on Giddens' structuration theory to give a background on his views. The second discusses the problems of social change theory according to Giddens. The third provides Giddens' own view on the social change theory. The paper will be concluded with a criticism of Giddens' theory on social change. As a summary, Giddens considers human history not as an evolution from a primitive beginning to an advanced society and that this social change cannot be explained by a single mechanism. In return, he gives five concepts that can explain social change, i.e. structural principles, intersocietal systems, time-space edges, episodic characterizations, and world time.

### **Summary of Structuration Theory**

B. Herry-Priyono summarizes two central themes in Giddens' structuration theory: the agent-structure relation and the time-space centrality.<sup>4</sup> Where other social science theorists see structure and agent as a conflicting opposition (a dualism), Giddens sees them as an interaction (a duality). Agents are the concrete people who are involved in continuous actions and events in the world. Structure is the rules and resources which are reproduced and institutionalized across time and space.<sup>5</sup> In structuration theory, the agent is not opposed to structure. The duality of structuration theory lies in the idea that structure is formed through reproduction of the social practices by the agents (unlike in Durkheim where structure is objective and external<sup>6</sup>). Thus, structure does not

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<sup>4</sup> B. Herry-Priyono, *Anthony Giddens: Suatu Pengantar* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2002), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xxxi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

exist separately from action but implicated in the production and reproduction; it is the outcome and medium of the agents' social practices.<sup>7</sup>

Time and space are usually considered as boundaries or stages where social life exists.<sup>8</sup> Functionalism also treats time and space as dualism: as dynamics of change contrasted with the statics or change against stability.<sup>9</sup> Giddens considers time and space not merely as a stage where a drama of life takes place, but as essential and constitutive features of the social world. Through duality, an agents' actions relate an action to a wider social structure in a time and space continuum. So as the agents reproduces their actions, they are actually reproducing social actions drawn from specific temporal and spatial structure. In other words, without time and space there will not be any action or structure.

One of Giddens main points related to social change is that the agents are aware of their own history. This awareness is defined in Giddens' view of three internal dimensions of the agents:<sup>10</sup> unconscious motivation, discursive consciousness, and practical consciousness. Unconscious motivation is the desire that can direct an action but not the action itself. This may be related to Freud's idea of id, albeit a non-sexual one. B. Herry-Priyono gives an example that it is rare when we go to work, we are consciously motivated by money. The money motivation rarely comes to mind unless in specific events. Discursive consciousness is the capacity to reflect and give verbal expression regarding a particular action, e.g. someone who buys a cigarette can explain that he buys the cigarette to smoke. Practical consciousness refers to the practical knowledge that has been taken for granted, it cannot be explained at all times. As an example, we automatically say "Hello" when we answer a phone, even though we may not know what "Hello" actually means. For Giddens the practical consciousness comes through reproductions of routine actions and activities in social life. The agents' repeated actions and practices gradually becomes structure and equally constraints and enables the social practices without the necessity of further questioning of motives.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>8</sup> Loyal, Steven, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 93

<sup>9</sup> B. Herry-Priyono, *Anthony Giddens: Suatu Pengantar* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2002), 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Change can occur because the line between practical and discursive consciousness is very thin and also because of the agents' own reflexive monitoring of conduct.<sup>11</sup>

### **Problems with Evolutionism and Social Change Theories**

Evolution comes from the word *evolutia*, which are composed from *e-* (out of) and *-volatus* (rolled).<sup>12</sup> The word was used to refer to the unrolling of parchment and until 17<sup>th</sup> century was not applied to the meaning as we know today. Giddens refers to evolution in social science as an endogenous or unfolding model of change. This model assumes that the “main structural features of a society, governing both stability and change, are internal to that society”.<sup>13</sup> This is related to biological organism which has within itself a trajectory of growth or an unfolding of potentials. The impact of external events is merely to withhold or accentuate the growth. Giddens further defines evolutionary theory in social sciences to have four distinctive characteristics:<sup>14</sup>

1. A conceptual continuity with biological evolution;
2. It has a mechanism of change, in addition to progression of change;
3. A sequence of stages of social development must be specified, where the mechanism of change is linked to the social organization;
4. Identifying the mechanism of social change that can be applied across whole spectrum of human history, not as exclusive mechanism but as a dominant one.

For Giddens, history is not shaped like evolution. The shape of evolution is that of one big tree trunk with branches. The simplest organisms at the top and the most complex ones at the bottom. There are three reasons for Giddens why human history does not follow the evolutionary shape<sup>15</sup> which are related to his duality of agents and structure. Giddens also criticizes social sciences that

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-233.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

are prone to accept evolutionary models, he cited four dangers that may happen if the evolutionary concept is forced to social sciences.

The first reason human history does not follow evolutionary shape is that humans make their history in cognizance of that history. As stated in his structuration theory on agent-structure duality and time-space centrality, humans are reflexive being who are appropriating time, instead of just living in time. As humans are aware of their own history, the causal mechanism of social change becomes complicated. History is not just lived by humans but can be transformed consciously.

The second reason is that in biological evolutionary theory, the only way for the species to change is through mutation, it is independent from the capability of the species as agents. The species does not consciously will it. Giddens said the conditions that apply in biology does not apply in social science. Unlike organism, societies do not have a clear closure on what evolves. For Biology what evolves is clear, i.e. organisms, but in social sciences, the definitions of “societies” or “cultural systems” vary across the theorists.

The third reason is that human history is not a world-growth story. The common view in evolutionary theory is that societies emerged from the Middle-East, continuously progressing through the Greeks up to Industrialization today in Western countries. In other words, it is ethnocentrically weighted to the Western culture. Giddens said in Western social science there was no mentioning of India or China (ancient or modern) at the top of the growth story. For Giddens the history of humans is started by a stable state in small hunter-gatherer societies, continued with class-divided civilization in Mesopotamia, marked with rise and fall of civilizations as described by Toynbee. The pattern was broken by the rise of the West which gives history a different picture by truncating the whole history into a period of two or three centuries. Giddens did not see this as a growth but as a destruction of the traditional world by the West through capitalism. Thus, for Giddens, the modern world is the result of discontinuity rather than continuity of societies.

Giddens mentioned there are four dangers that comes with evolutionary thoughts. These are the reasons why he thought evolutionary thoughts must be radically avoided. The dangers are: unilineal compression, homological compression, normative illusion, and temporal distortion<sup>16</sup>.

The first danger is unilineal compression, which means a tendency to generalize a specific evolution into a necessary general evolution. Giddens gives an example that in Europe feudalism precedes capitalism, therefore it can be said that feudalism is a frontrunner of capitalism. However, it may not be a necessary stage for a society to evolve to capitalism. A society can adopt capitalism without going to feudal period. The second danger is homological compression, a danger to think of a similarity (homology) between stages of social evolution and development of the individual personality. The complexity of society is mirrored by the individuals living in it. An example of this theory is Freud's concept of repression in *Civilization and its Discontents*. In Freud, society is thought to progress based on the degree of repression in its people. It began with primitive tribes that lived without sexual repression up to modern civilizations that have to live with repression in order to survive. Giddens said that the findings of modern anthropology dispels the theory.

The third danger, normative illusion, means the tendency to relate superior economic, political, or military power with moral superiority in an evolutionary progress; this is related to evolutionism's ethnocentric tendency. Giddens said that this is dangerous because at first glance it seems that adapting to the social traits of superior powers sounds ethically neutral but in fact it is the same to adapting to sheer might. He cited that evolutionism does not remember an adage "might does not confer right". The fourth danger, temporal distortion is the tendency to think that history can only be thought as social change, that history is confused with historicity. Historicity for Giddens means identifying history as progressive change, with cognitive view that it can be changed further<sup>17</sup>. This idea of historicity is different from history as elapsed time. Evolutionism tends to confuse elapsed time with the necessity of change.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 374

In conclusion, Giddens thinks that social change cannot be explained by a single and sovereign mechanism. Evolutionism (and historical materialism) cannot be repaired by another theory with different mechanism since it will not solve the shortcomings of the evolutionary theory. Giddens prefers to deconstruct the evolutionary theories in terms of power and change.

### **Social Change According to Giddens**

Although Giddens criticizes the evolutionary theories that generalize social change, he does not intend to discard all general concepts that may be used to analyze social change. As evolutionary theories are criticized by Giddens because the changes are mainly endogenous, Giddens provides both endogenous and exogenous factors to account for the social change.<sup>18</sup> Giddens provides five concepts that he considers relevant in analyzing social change:<sup>19</sup>

Structural principles	Principles of organization of institutions (societal totalities): factors involved in the institutional alignment of a society
Intersocietal systems	Relations between social totalities
Time-Space edges	Indication of connection (whether conflictual or symbiotic) between societies of differing structural types
Episodic characterizations	Delineation of modes of institutional change of comparable form
World time	Combinations of events that influence the nature of episodes; the effects of the understanding of historical precedents upon episodic characterizations

Giddens defined structural principles as “the principles of organization which allow recognizably consistent forms of time-space distancing on the basis of definite mechanisms of societal integration”.<sup>20</sup> Basically, it means that society is organized by the modes of prevailing institutions in a social system, referring to the time-space distancing. Time-space distancing is the degree

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 274

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 244

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

of propinquity between contacts for two actors<sup>21</sup>, which is not merely physical but also social. For example, the physical distance between Jakarta to Ujung Kulon is shorter than the Jakarta to Singapore. However, from time-space distancing perspective, Jakarta-Singapore is shorter compared to Jakarta-Ujung Kulon (at this time approx. 6-7 hours by car, motorcycle, or bus) because there is a faster mode of transport for Jakarta-Singapore (approx. 2 hours by flight). In Tribal Society Giddens considers it to be characterized by a high presence availability and low time-space distancing<sup>22</sup>. Based on the structural principles, he classifies three types of society:

Tribal Society (Oral Cultures)	Tradition (communal practices) Kinship Group Sanctions	Fusion of social and system integration
Dominant locale organization	Band group or villages	
Class-Divided Society  State {	Tradition (communal practices) Kinship	(Differentiation of social and system integration)
	Politics – military power Economic interdependence (low lateral and vertical integration)	
Dominant locale organization	Symbiosis of city and countryside	
Class Society  State {	Routinization Kinship (family) Surveillance Politics —military power Economic interdependence (high lateral and vertical integration)	(Differentiation of social and system integration)
Dominant locale organization	The 'created environment'	

Tribal society is embedded in time and space. The structural principle is legitimized based on tradition and kinship, embedding themselves in time and space. In tribal society, writing has not been invented, thus high presence is required for social and system integration. Giddens considers writing to be closely related to formation of state and class and changed the time-space distancing. In class-divided society, writing has been invented, which increases the time-space distancing. There is a differentiation between city and countryside, where the city becomes an administration space for resource allocation as commonly found in agrarian states. Tradition and kinship remains important aspects in this society but the state is legitimized more by military power.

<sup>21</sup> Ira J. Cohen, *Structuration Theory: Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Social Life* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989), 82.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 98.



The politics and sanctions become separated with formal law and punishments based on written texts. For Giddens, class society (as seen in modern capitalism) is not developed out of class-divided society. It is a discontinuity, not a continuity. In class society, tradition and communal kinship are gone, replaced by routinization of day-to-day activities and filial kinship. It is marked by disembedding but interconnecting of state and economic institutions. City-countryside relations are replaced with a created environment and social integration is replaced by surveillance in this society; time-space distancing is also greater.

In Giddens' view systems are not the same as societies. A system can span two or more societies and a society can have two or more systems that can spread to other societies.<sup>23</sup> This concept is referred to as Intersocietal Systems. It is a concept where a society does not exist in isolation to itself but in relation to (or intersecting) another societal system, which can influence one another. societies substantially different conditions for change might exist. Intersocietal systems is closely related to Time-Space edges, which is a contact point between two societies of different structural principles.<sup>24</sup> This contact may involve tensions and instabilities such as war, invasion, or threat of attack that can change the societies. Time-space edges can also take in the form of alliances, trade, and in modern times mining facilities or outsourcing factories. Giddens categorized intersocietal systems broadly into:<sup>25</sup>

Tribal societies		Pre-historical and fragmentary systems
Class-divided societies Tribal societies		Imperial world systems
Capitalist societies Class-divided societies Tribal societies		Early capitalist world economy
Capitalist societies State socialist societies	Super-power blocs	Contemporary capitalist world economy (world nation-state system)
Developing countries		
Class divided societies Tribal societies		

<sup>23</sup> Ian Craib, *Anthony Giddens* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 40.

<sup>24</sup> Ira J. Cohen, *Structuration Theory: Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Social Life* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989), 275.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 184.

In tribal societies, the intersocietal systems are fragmentary, they are more confined in terms of time and space. They are unlikely to influence one another. Imperial world systems exist in a tension with the tribal societies and was frequently attacked or pressurized by them.

Giddens considers social life as episodic; this means that social life has a specifiable beginning and an end. In larger scale, this means that institutions also have a beginning and an end. The term Giddens uses is episodic characterization, which means “sequences of change having a specifiable opening, trend of events and outcomes”.<sup>26</sup> He gives the emergence of an agrarian state as an example. One of the pattern that can explain the emergence of agrarian state is the surplus production of neighboring areas that leads a state combining the communities under one administration. Military power co-ordinations are also another pattern that can explain the emergence of state. This concept is clearly against the evolutionism that tries to map continuity across social changes. For Giddens there is a start and end of society, which put up more emphasis on discontinuity, similar to Toynbee’s *Rise and Fall of Civilization*.

With world time, Giddens means that social change has a historicity, referring to the awareness of the agents. For Giddens social change is not deterministic, but malleable and contingent to the intersocietal systems. History for humans is monitored and reflexive, they also have the capacity to change the direction of the history. Various intersocietal systems are influencing the episodic characters of a society but humans still have control and context regarding the social change. The concept of world time came from Wolfram Eberhard, meaning “similar sequences of processes and events leading to change may have dissimilar implications and effects”.<sup>27</sup> As an example, France and England has similar democratic systems but they arrive to those systems with different processes and different times. Giddens expands Eberhard’s concept to include the idea that people can monitor the changes in other societies and reflect upon their successes and failures. Thus, social change is not just deterministically influenced by various factors but also is determined by humans as agents in society. It is in this world time concept that we can see human agency takes

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>27</sup> Ira J. Cohen, *Structuration Theory: Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Social Life* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989), 276.

its place in social change. Humans are not passive being swung around by the changes around them, but they can look at what is happening across other societies and decide whether to adopt or reject such changes. As an example, in early 2010s there was an event referred to as Arab Spring where violent protests broke across Northern African and Arab countries demanding revolutions, democracy, and regime change<sup>28</sup>. It began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and other countries. What needs to be noted is not the event itself but the fact that such major event did not cause equal results across the countries. Although few countries had successful revolution towards democracy such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, other governments still held their powers. Some governments made compromises with the demands, while some battled continuously and lost, some are still battling until today. This event shows that there is still human agency (at least in the hands of the country leaders and revolutionary leaders) in the social change.

We can conclude that in Giddens' five concepts of social change, he considers not just endogenous societal factors but also exogenous societal factors through intersocietal systems, time-space edges, and world time. We can even say that Giddens five concepts lean heavier to exogenous concepts. Giddens also gives a room for humans' agency to take part in the social change. This is where his structuralism makes his model of social change different from the evolutionism. His concept of structuralism gives place for human agency in social change.

## **Criticism and Conclusion**

Giddens' concepts, can be too abstract and cannot be readily used to explain social changes directly in practice. Unlike Marx and Durkheim who proposed an intuitive mechanism of change, it is difficult to see the mechanism in Giddens' five concepts. This may be due to Giddens' own approach to avoid similar methods as the evolutionary approach proposed by the theorists. If there is an underlying mechanism, it can be located in the time-space distancing idea. Nevertheless, this idea can be seen as brushing along the lines of evolutionary mechanism. Therefore Giddens can be seen as proposing expanding single-mechanism to penta-mechanism, adding abstraction

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<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab\\_Spring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring)

and complexities, while also putting an emphasis on his “equivalence” of single-mechanism i.e. time-space distancing.

In Giddens’ view, the time-space distancing follows a similar trajectory of embeddedness (in tribal communities) continued along the path of dis-embeddedness in capitalist societies, which is contradictory with his rejection of such concept. He criticized single-mechanism criterion of social change such as Marx and Durkheim, but ultimately he is also proposing a single-mechanism criterion as well.

Giddens is also leaning too much on discontinuity of society as seen from his idea of episodic characterization. Episodic means finding a time and space position where a society starts and ends. In most cases this type of position is not clear from history. Most societies are not entirely destroyed, but survived in some form e.g. Roman Empire in current-day Italy. Social change involves both continuity and discontinuity.

In conclusion, Giddens criticizes not just evolutionary social change theory but also wider social theories that have the pretensions to unlock a magic formula to explain society. There is a tendency (at Giddens’ time) for social science to borrow ideas from natural science. Giddens correctly thinks that such approach is not ideal. The manifold of human experience cannot be reduced to a simple mechanistic explanation offered by the social theorists. Giddens also rightly points out the dangers of evolutionary ideas, mostly the ethnocentrism practiced by the social theorists. To explain social change, Giddens’ proposed five general concepts that are more complex and incorporating humans’ agency in it. However Giddens views can be criticized as providing similar mechanism, but can still be mechanistic as well, albeit from a different spectrum.

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