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Social and Economic Change – Opportunity Windows for the Young Generation
  (background study)

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Introduction. Change theories

The word “change” has many meanings, most of the time it refers to movement, alteration, evolution, revolution, development, discontinuance, shifting, transformation, reform. Classic definitions like: change is the movement of an entity from the state X in the T₀ moment to the state Y in the T₁ moment, although frequently used, do not convey all the complexity of the term since change also occurs with the appearance or disappearance of an entity. On the other hand, an entity preserves its identity following change (e.g. an individual’s aging process does not modify his/her identity). In his analysis of the theories of change, Boudon (1984) suggests that one has to keep in mind also the linguistic changes, often one and the same reality being expressed using different words, like: organism-system, idealist-culturalist.

Debates regarding change have been going on since the Antiquity, the disputes between Heraclitus and Parmenides being, one way or the other, present in all change theories. Considering the movement and implicitly the change that accompanies it as being continuous, one can encounter serious difficulties in the scientific research under the aspect of investigating or measuring a phenomenon because the constant situation in moment T₀ is no longer valid in moment T₁. Boudon (1984) being more concessive, admits that there are processes whose state in T₁ can be determined knowing their state in T₀. But this characteristic is not a general one, in most cases, especially in the case of social changes, determinism ”is not an essential assumption” (“nest pas un postulat indispensable”). Stability periods, short as they may be, are nothing else but conventions, because every moment change doesn’t stop, the object or the phenomenon investigated does not stop, change goes on. Therefore, in order to exit this dead end, we have to assume that, on a short term, changes are insignificant and we should use data collected at a specific moment as being also valid for the next moments, a fact that does not entirely suit the deontology of research. The same Boudon says that “the theories of social change cannot belong to the scientific genre (in a Popperian way) except on one condition: that the data whose explanation in researched be a well-defined ensemble. This implies the fact that such theories cannot be but local or partial.” (Our translation) („Les théories du changement social ne peuvent appartenir au genre scientifique (au sens popperien) qu’à une condition: que les données dont on recherche l’explication constituent un ensemble bien défini.”)
ensemble bien défini. Ce qui implique que de telles théories ne peuvent être que locales et partielles»).

Unlike Nisbet (1969) who due to this reason considers such theories irrelevant, Boudon considers them necessary because they answer some problems regarding the society.

This is the reason why researchers have focused their attention and efforts especially on “the periods of social stability, trying analyses focused on a single aspect of the social life” which “are partial to depth and allow for controlling the studied case through controlling and isolating variables. But this fact, though it engendered a detailed and profound knowledge of society, cannot offer satisfying results in discussing the problem of change, which entails the mutability and the disorganization of the systems.” (Our translation) (Ciprian Tripon, Ioana Pop, 2000, p.132).

As a consequence, change has become in itself an object of research. Defined as “the passing of a social system or a part of it from one state of being to another state from a qualitative and quantitative point of view” (our translation) (Zamfir, Vlaseanu, 1993, p.521) and recognized as a dominant theme of sociology even from its beginnings in the 19th century, it was analyzed by Comte and Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Weber. Currently there is a large number of sociologists, historians, economists, etc. who tackle this problem from different angles (Robert Nisbet, „Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development”, 1969; Collins, „Organizational change: Sociological perspectives”, 1998; Weick, Quin, „Organizational change and development”, 1999; Huy, „Time, temporal capability and planned change”, 2001; Pettigrew et al, „Studying organizational change and development: Challenges for future research” 2001; Buchanan and Boddy, „The expertise of the change agent”, 1992; Andrew Leigh, „Effective Change”, 1988, etc.).

Despite having been approached from an evolutionary, functionalist, actionalist or conflictualist point of view, social change is characterized through a few fundamental traits: it is a collective phenomenon, noticeable and identifiable in time, long-lasting and which influences the development of a society. (Guy Roche, 1968). Likewise, it takes place following a relatively simple scheme: the context of the change – the agents of the change – the change itself – the effects of the change. But each of these elements seems to be very complex, interacting both with itself and with other elements.

Discussing social changes, generally speaking, one of the important aspects investigated by researchers is the one connected to the factors of social change. Durkheim, Malthus and others underline the importance of the demographic factor. Durkheim even formulated a “gravitation law of the social world” whose content was represented by the double causality relationship between the population density, the labor division and the moral density on the one hand and the civilization, economic, social and cultural progress on the other hand. The generalization of the demographic factor in explaining social changes is criticized by other analysts of change and invalidated by reality because it has been concluded that demographic evolutions have not only benefic results, but also less desirable effects (e.g. negative effects on the environment), and on the other hand some countries have developed through other methods than work division and technological progress – by conquering new territories, emigration, limiting the population growth, etc.
Another factor deemed responsible for social changes is technological progress, the “wave” mentioned by Toffler, which brings to the history’s foreground new types of society like the agricultural, industrial, informational and genetic ones. Lewis Mumford has nonetheless used this factor as a criterion for classifying societies in history. Marx used the economic factor as being predominant over the social one, respectively the class struggle, capable to transform society. Max Weber centers his explanation on faith, and Allain Tourraine underlines the role of ideologies in social change. One has also to mention that in the social domain, in a larger measure than in the physical, natural domain, the role of the hazard and of the subjectivity is more obvious (Boudon, 1984). This happens even more so as the agents of change be then individuals, social groups, elites, communities are motivated by problems, values, ideologies, interests.

A synthesis of the explanatory factors of social changes has been made by Durand and Weil in „Sociologie contemporană” (1989, p.279) where they have indicated four large groups of factors: demographic, technical, cultural and ideological ones.

As for the types of change, there are numerous classification criteria and implicitly, numerous forms that change takes: quantitative/qualitative, sudden/slow, endogenous/exogenous, desirable/undesirable, major/minor, global/local, reversible/irreversible, planned/spontaneous and the list could go on with the type of changes according to the domain they take place in: social, economic, political, cultural, etc. Regardless of the criteria used and the ensuing classes, these classifications have rather a didactic importance because no change is exclusively exogenous or endogenous, minor or major, desirable or undesirable. There are always intertwining elements that together with the sum of the factors triggering change accentuate its complexity (Boudon illustrates this idea with the emergence and manifestation of racism).

Orlikovski (1996) has identified four models of change, among the first three being exogenous and episodic, and the last one is endogenous and continuous:

- the planned model in which the change is deliberately initiated and imposed from above
- the technological imperative model where technological forces trigger change
- the model of the punctual balance in which the change is discontinuous with long periods of stability interrupted by radical changes
- the model of situational change in which the essence of change is connected to the daily and continuous practices of the members of an organization.

Actually, the main difference between the classification methods regarding change throughout time is represented by the presence or the absence among criteria of the axiological element (value, culture).

**Economic and social changes**
Often technological and scientific discoveries triggered economic changes, starting with the steam engine (here we don’t take into consideration previous discoveries, which were nonetheless important) which brought about the industrial revolution and founded the basis of the mechanization with all the mutations ensemble within the economic, social, cultural, daily life and lifestyle areas and which continued with discoveries such as the electricity, the aviation industry, the computers industry, etc. Although very important, the role of the scientific discoveries in triggering changes on the economic level cannot be generalized since there are numerous other factors which bring about change: the institutional ones (Douglas C North, 1990), cultural, religious ones (Weber, 1904-1905), educational, urban, political ones (Seymour, Lipset, 1959).

In the middle of the 20th century, Talcott Parsons (1951) in “The Social System” formulated a theory of interactions between the four subsystems of society: the cultural, economic, political, and social ones, underlining the fact that changes occurring on either level generate changes on the on the other levels, thus disturbing social order.

According to the classic theory the basic needs of the individual and the society are covered through economic activity. Because such needs are continuously changing, mirroring the evolution of the society, the economy has to adapt too, both from the perspective of the means of production, of the material input, of the technologies used, but also especially from the perspective of human resources, meaning the skills, the health and the psychological state, the attitude towards work, personal and collective values and the human relationships.

The main theories that cover economic changes are the economic growth theories and the economic cycles theories. The first try to conceptualize realities but also ways of thinking specific to certain geographic areas and temporary segments. One can mention here economic growth, economic development, socio-economic development, economy, sustainable development. The theories of economic cycles explain economic evolutions by means of some repetitions that can be rendered graphically and allow for forecasts of these evolutions on a short, medium and long range. The existence of periods of longer sustained economic growth especially during the postwar period until the beginning of the 70s in industrialized countries have generated doubts among economists regarding the validity of the economic cycle concept (Krugman 2009, 19). The doubts have disappeared with the outbreak of the two energy crises in 1973 and 1979, followed by local crises in Mexico, South America and Japan in the 1990s and the current international crisis that has started in 2007/2008, making Krugman speak even about the “return of the decline economy”. (Our translation)

But when we speak about economic change one must also take into account not only changes within the economy but also within its components: production, distribution, exchange, consumption, the importance of various economic areas, the balance between them. For example, the ever more visible changes within the food industry illustrated by an increased demand for organic products creates among farmers a niche group of organic food producers sharing a common production manner according to pre-
established norms and also sharing common interests regarding the marketing process, the cost/income ratio, specific information, the competition with the other food producers.

Such an economic change can be a gradual, continuous, partial, sudden, general, local or a global one regarding the market’s demands but also regarding the inner dynamics of the economic system and can generate in its turn changes at the level of consumers’ needs, meaning that it can introduce and promote new demands or reshape the previous ones or they can bring changes in the social structure. One can think of the question, Marxist as it may be: “Do needs determine the economic activity or the latter is to be found at the basis of needs?” Actually the two elements are intertwined, sometimes they are complimentary, and sometimes they are opposites due to an ever more insinuating element – the interest. Habermas (1976) says that even acquaintances, especially those from the social domain are made with an interest in mind. This idea was also supported by Richard Swedberg who considered that reinterpreting the concept of interest from its perspective of choice, decision and action determinant allows for a better understanding of the social construction of economic institutions (Swedberg, R. 2005, Interest, Maidenhead: Open University Press).

Our opinion is that the major changes we face today are:

- the globalization of the economy and the growth of the interdependence between national economies and economic areas, economic agents and the speed of changes’ spread. For example in 1990 Bundesbank increased the interest rate in order to control the inflation caused by the reunification of the country. This measure caused perturbations in the whole Western Europe and even caused conflicts of interest.

- the increase of the share of the tertiary sector in the developing countries (both regarding the absorption of the work force as well as regarding the contribution to the GDP) and deindustrialization together with the migration of the industry to the emergent countries. In the Western countries the tertiary sector goes beyond 60-70% reaching 80% in some countries. Meanwhile, the industry moved towards the Asian area, especially China and India, which have extremely high economic growth rates since they have a numerous and cheap labor force.

- the positioning of the banking system within the center of the economic system and the depletion of its possibilities of stimulating economic growth and the ethical problems that accompany this system.

- the ageing of the population and the disruption of the normal evolution of labor force replacement process.

- an ever stronger intertwining between private and professional life meaning by that the invasion of private life by the professional life (which is exactly the opposite of Weberian bureaucracy.)

The present faces these economic changes on the background of an ever more precarious social
stability, possibly even accompanied by the installation of a new “economic order” characterized by the repositioning of the economy’s components: the production system, the finance-banking system, the budgetary system, but also through the appropriation of a volatile character for the economic rules and of a perpetual change which leads to the necessity of adapting constantly the economic environment.

At the same time with the changes from the economic area, one can notice changes in the social area, some of them determined by the economic causes, other which determine themselves economic changes.

The social changes are usually underlined in the theories of social stratification, the theories of social mobility and in demographic theories, especially those of the “demographic transitions”. Social stratification reflects the hierarchy resulting from the inequalities regarding the access to and the distribution of economic, professional or status resources among the members of the society. Both from a functionalist perspective (Davis, Moore, 1945) as well as from a conflictualist perspective (Tumin, 1953) the main cause of the stratification is represented by “the system of motivation offered to the individuals to occupy diverse positions and the carry on the associated tasks through differentiated material and prestige orientated rewards.” (Vlăsceanu 2011, p.301)

There are two great theory groups regarding stratification: those that divide the society in relatively homogenous social classes (Marx and the post-Marxists, Weber and the post-Weberians), respectively those that see social stratification in terms of multiple strata, with vague divisions (Pahl, R. E. 1989, apud Vlăsceanu 2011, p.308). The Marxist dichotomy of the 19th century dividing the society in the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (defined through the relation with the property and the control over the production means both in a conflictual relationship), is nuanced by post Marxists and adapted to the new realities of the 20th century: not only does the working class get homogenized (as a follow-up of obtaining class consciousness), but it also gets diversified, paralleling the diversification of qualifications with the ever increasing labor division. The capitalists, in their turn, are divided into owners and managers and one can see the emergence of a new class within history, the middle class. Weber redefines social classes switching the accent from production to the consumption. For him, social stratification is the result of the unequal distribution of not only economic resources, but also of the symbolic ones (status) and of the power which includes differences of prestige and life styles. (M. Weber, 1946, apud Vlăsceanu, 2011, p.302-303).

This stratification on social classes seems to be replaced today by an occupational stratification (Pahl, 1989, Grusky, Sorensen, 1998), by a division based on the consumption and life style models (Pakulski, Waters 1996), or according to the postmodern theories, on fragmentary identities and multiple affiliations of individuals to groups and areas of the economic-social life.

The theories of the social mobility are included in the ideas regarding the intergenerational mobility (occupational status variations occurring during an individual’s lifetime) or intergenerational mobility (occupational status variations occurring during several generations of the same family: children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents...), respectively of horizontal mobility (on the same stratum)
and of vertical mobility (which implies changing the social status), the latter one being either ascending or descending. (Rotariu, 1998)

Last but not least, demographic theories can explain the quantitative and qualitative mutations occurring among the population, by using numerous indicators such as the birth rate, the death rate, the marriages’ and the divorces’ rate, the life expectancy, many of these having nuances precisely in order to also underline qualitative aspects: the life expectancy within the health system, or the death rate for children, etc.

A synthesis of these theories of economic-social changes was developed by Grusky in his introduction to a paper he coordinated called Social Stratification: Class, Race and Gender in Social Perspective (2001, 2nd edition, p.33). He identified two types of approaches:

1. Structural approaches which encompass three important models: a) Economic Capital Models (Zeitlin 1982); b) Human or Political Capital Models which has two forms: Post-industrial Models (the „Optimistic” Version, the „Pessimistic” Version: Polarization and Exclusionism) and New Class Models (the Knowledge Class, the Managerial Class, the Parti-Bureaucratic Class); c) Differentiation Models (Gradationalism, Pluralism and Multidimensionalism)

2. Cultural Approaches that include: the Simple Uncoupling, Postmodernism (Fragmentation, New Social Movements), Cultural Emanationism.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this presentation is that the social changes analysis can be done using different approaches which would lead to different models and versions considering the factors, the change agents and their effects that were used in the study.

**The graduates’ adjustment to the new socio-economic realities**

Within the context of the ever faster changes, the graduates’ chance relies in their ability to adapt to change, an ability which should be encouraged and practiced beginning with the college years not necessary taking into consideration the hidden curriculum, but more explicitly, under a formal manner, through exercise and simulation, even more so considering that in the new life context one can develop even a resistance to change. This fact is considered by some researchers as being inherent to the human being, an idea strongly contested by others (Bareil and Savoie, 2002) based on the fact that it does not represent the complexity and the richness of the possible reactions towards change, or based on the fact that one attributes to this concept an exclusively negative connotation when actually the resistance to change can be interpreted also as a concern of the individual towards adaptation which means facing the challenge of the new context brought by change.

„[…] the ideological power of casting opposition (the articulation of grounded, yet different proposals and objectives) with « resistance » (a rather futile and backsliding failure to confront new
business realities). Thus, workers, who « resist » change tend to be cast as lacking the psychological make-up to deal with change, and so, are said to be weak and fearful of change, whereas, those who support or manage change are regarded as « go-ahead » chaps who have the « right stuff » for career success” (Collins, 1999, p.92).

The current approach to resistance to change is ambiguous (Piderit 2000) and this is accounted for by the individual’s work and life context and is not considered as something inherent to the latter. (Ford et al., 2002).

When entering the labor market the fundamental problem for each graduate is the one connected to the work environment, meaning the economic environment (the situation of the labor market, the income level, the development potential) and the social environment (the social affiliation structures and the networks, the interpersonal relationships) to which one can add the organization’s physical environment respectively the cultural one.

The changes in the occupational structure of a society can sometime influence the professional development of an individual and his/her inherited occupational status. But there are other factors that leave their mark upon this individual development: the personality, the human, social and cultural capital of the individual and his/her parents, the residential environment as well as a series of motivational factors (income, needs, work environment, interpersonal relationships, etc.). The occupational structures are flexible since they modify both according to the work force demand, technological production and organizational changes, as well as according to the work force offer, respectively its educational level. Such changes, parallel to the increasing number of the university graduates can lead to either a constraint for the people to accept the existing job offers, sometimes below their qualification, or to adapt the occupational structures to the educational level of the work force.

The graduates, facing the realities of the labor market act according to the logics of formal economy, according to the rational choice theory which maximizes usefulness by searching for a workplace where they can value the qualifications they get through studies as well as improving their chances of professional development. Boudon (2000) establishes at the basis of this behavior several postulates: methodological individualism, understanding, instrumentalism, egocentrism, maximization or optimization. But he also admits that there are situations where this theory becomes invalid. There are within economy and sociology alternative theories (Elster, Putnam, Bellah) which insist on the morality of economic agents, on the irrational behavior guided by affinities, judgments, feelings, values, beliefs more than by interests.

Social and economic changes bring alterations also at a behavioral level of the university graduates looking for a job. For Romania, as well as for the other former communist states this is visible in mentality and attitude change regarding the role of the state within the society, a change which demands for time, education, and training. Szeleny (1979) has underlined in his work *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* an interesting difference between the communist economies and the capitalist ones: while within capitalism the market creates inequalities and the redistribution corrects them only
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partially, within communism the redistribution creates inequalities (especially regarding the intellectuals) that the market manages to correct only partially. This mentality of the dependence towards the state, although overcome in a certain degree, continues to persist maybe even in traditionally intellectual families (such a hypothesis would be worth investigating) and is manifested among other things through still low entrepreneurship. The fact of enlisting the Romanian intellectual within the pattern of the Western "New Class" (made up of individuals with higher education, a high professional status and a relatively big income who do not produce but manipulate ideas and words), (Bruce-Briggs 1979) was delayed by the model of economic construction of the Romanian "paternalistic" capitalism (King and Szeleny, 2004). Unlike the liberal or the hybrid capitalism, the paternalistic capitalism allowed for the preservation of decision-making positions, of economic and political power by the former members of the communist leadership who didn’t only avoid promoting capitalism, but even tried to stop it, thus defending their privileges.

The solution to this blocking relies largely within the educational system coupled with individual effort. Offering students adequate knowledge within a dynamic curriculum according to the novelties from each field of study together with the construction of an entrepreneurial culture can be means, both necessary and useful to transform the graduates’ apprehensions connected to the economic and social change in opportunities for development. On the other hand, on the labor market, the market mechanisms act coupled with the social networks, personal acquaintances or connections, “embeddedness” (Mark Granovetter, 1985) that young people must create so that they could use further on.

Despite the diplomas’ inflation, a phenomenon that started to influence also other former communist countries within the background of the tertiary education’s development, counter to the already proven errors of the human capital model (Mark Blaug, 1976), the realities provided by the labor market unlike the educational levels based structure of the unemployment, show an appreciation by the society of diplomas and of their holders, even if sometimes such indicators hide the phenomenon of over-education, of taking a job that demands a lower education than the individual might have.

The virtuality, the communication in a globalized world and the offer adaptation to the ageing population are three areas in which regardless of the educational specialization, one must identify specific activity domains that have a place on the labor market.

Conclusions

An analysis of social change must use the results of recent research within this domain, without neglecting the fundamental lines of thought of classical sociology.

Approaching the problem of social change cannot be done scientifically but from an interdisciplinary perspective and through abandoning the idea of a determinative factor for change, of an
absolute general model of causality.

The intentional, deliberate changes within the socio-economic domain can represent an obstacle when it comes to the absorption of the students by the labor market, but they can also represent an opportunity, knowing well that young people are adaptable, less flexible, and more receptive to the new than older persons.

The young graduate of a higher institution must know the world in which he/she has to integrate in the future, not only the labor market, but also the ensemble of the economic and social life, to be able to choose for himself/herself an individual trajectory, to be able to relate himself/herself appropriately to the others and adapt quickly to changes, a fundamental aptitude for obtaining success.

Bibliography:


