**The Mechanics of Change**

***Introduction***

* No reliable off-the-shelf model of change–I’ve been looking for years. Rather than offer some stock model from a textbook, I’d rather explain the way I look at the dynamics of change. It’s not fail-safe, but it’s the best I have to offer.
* Where does change begin? In the universe of ideas and desires, or in the earthy and material? People tend to look to the former for explanations (ideas propagated on TV or in school), but I find it more rewarding to look at the more humble material side of existence. (In fact, both interact as the process of change goes on, as we’ll see.)

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[Test case: How do you explain the settlement of the Pacific? Because men chafed under the authority of their older brothers and just wanted out? Or because the sailing canoe was available to carry them hundreds of miles away? Both were responsible, but without the latter they would have certainly stayed at home.]

* Let’s start with the material changes, then. They’re probably the more usual way the dynamic of change begins. It’s easy for an attractive and useful material object–like an outboard motorboat or a car–to insinuate itself into our lives. It’s simply a material object, after all, and poses no apparent threat to the rest of our lifestyle and culture.

***Material change and its effects***

Two examples in the islands

1) plywood typhoon houses in Chuuk in 1971

* panels put in upside down so that windows were very low. No furniture, so people, who sat on the floor, could get a breeze
* plywood panels added to create rooms–and provide for some privacy
* kerosene stoves replaced destroyed cookhouses–just enough for a single household’s needs.

1. wage income as jobs increased in 60s and 70s

* money handled like private property and went to the wage-earner, not the head of the lineage
* led to redrawing the lines of authority, with much more going to the head of the household than to the head of the lineage
* shift in child-rearing patterns followed, with parents assuming major responsibility

Two examples in the US

1. cheap automobile after World War II

* Life in 30s and 40s: large cities, but divided into neighborhoods, often ethnic. People worked at same job all their life and lived in same place. Stability and rootedness, even in cities.
* Productive capacity for military channeled into consumer goods after WWII; with prosperity, more people could afford autos. Mobility changed US life greatly.
* Interstate highway systems, ability to move around more easily: shopping malls, motels, move to suburbs
* job relocation, pack-up-and-move society, breakdown of traditional neighborhoods, loss of participation in community groups (“Bowling Alone”), construction of personal support community, individualism, decline in church attendance.
* Meanwhile, TV was developed in 50s; reinforcing many of the changes–eg, less family recreation, culture of individualism.

computer technology in 80s and 90s

* streams of changes run in many directions, but let’s look at the impact on kids.
* time spent on computer: computer games, chat rooms, downloading music, net surfing. Much less time outdoors, with attendant health problems (obesity) from lack of exercise.
* growing isolation of kids, tendency to inhabit private world, reinforcement of individualism.

***Dynamics of Change***

*Change happens in clusters*. Significant change usually requires more than a single input. These changes build on one another, propelling population in a certain direction.

* autos after WWII, but also cheap fuel, good roads, lowcost housing, expansion of colleges–other factors related to expansion and prosperity
* computers, but also technological explosion in computer industry, television, junk food, working moms and latchkey kids, less time together in the family

*New ideology follows*. As forces for change build on one another, people develop an ideology to support the new lifestyle. In US, and perhaps increasingly in the islands, emphasis on the value of “personal independence and choice” becomes much stronger. (How could such an ideology thrive in an older society that severely curtailed the choices people had, whether over jobs or spouses?)

*Cumulative effect of change*. Changes run their course with a mighty cumulative force, carrying us out on a strong tide. Some swim in the opposite direction, but they are rather few (eg, those who do not have a TV set, or insist that family dinner be eaten together). Most “go with the flow” until an alert is sounded (eg, school violence at Columbine, 39 people watching woman killed in the street without offering help, epidemic of obesity). Then they ask what went wrong, and begin the search for ways to arrest the problems that have grown out of the change.

*Change at multiple levels*. Changes cut through the conventional sociological categories:

* Material: Often enough material change ignites the fuse and precipitates change. Whatever desires people may have for “freedom” or an “open society,” real change won’t happen without the material conditions of possibility. Eg, Individuals have to have the wherewithal to support themselves independently of their lineage–through cash rather than land.
* Cognitive: As new possibilities open up to us and our universe expands. Our ideas change to reflect this.
* Attitudinal: New desires grow from these new possibilities. Eg, as people become more mobile, their tastes in friends may change. They may regard reliance on their broader family as demeaning, or their family’s reliance on them as parasitic.
* Self-definition: People may define themselves as future-oriented, when they never were before, or self-made when they had always regarded themselves as the product of their kin relations.

*Structural change*. Social structures (patterns of organization in certain areas of life) are sometimes changed as a result. Structures cut across the above lines and are much more deeply embedded in the culture.

* Family organization, for instance, which includes: use of resources (money rather than land), allocation of resources, authority patterns, size of household, residence patterns, assignment of parenting roles and responsibilities.

The result is far-reaching change that touches the “guts” of a culture.

***Coping with Change***

*Threat in change*. Change enriches us, but it also diminishes us. We are offered marvelous new worlds and attractive possibilities for self-growth. Yet, we are in danger of losing our cultural and societal roots as we strike out for these new worlds. People instinctively realize the danger of being uprooted or alienated.

*Adaptation* is the unconscious mechanism for adjusting the new to fit the old and familiar.

* occurs throughout changes at all levels: eg, installing the wall panels of a typhoon house upside down so those sitting on the floor can feel the breeze; using holy water to guard against black magic
* sometimes means the inner change of goals and values to correspond to the new realities of life today: eg, adjustment to new parenting roles.

*Fallout from change*. Even so, a gap remains between the new and the old. The problems that emerge (suicide, domestic violence, child abuse, etc) demand a larger communal response. This may take different forms:

* attempts to reclaim the past–eg, Chamorro language restoration on Guam, back-to-the-marae sentiment of “Once Were Warriors.” (Salvation lies in a return to the past.)
* creation of entirely new organizations to deal with the fallout from change–eg, suicide hotline for at-risk kids, abuse shelters. (Salvation lies in full embrace of the modern in all its forms.)
* salvage from the past in order to create new institutions capable of dealing with our problems–eg, restitution and alternate sentencing in the court system, finding new ways to regroup the extended family on occasions. (Salvation lies in judicious adaptation of old ways to answer present-day problems.)

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