cultural lag

The thesis of “cultural lag” formulated by the North American sociologist William F. Ogburn can be considered among the earliest sociological attempts to explain social change from social-cultural premises and not psycho-biological ones. Indeed, social change is one of the most important theoretical problems in sociology. Almost all the sociologists that belonged to so-called classical sociology sought to understand the process of social change.

The thesis of cultural lag is well-known among scholars of technology because Ogburn has been considered a technological determinist for his explanation of social change with respect to material culture (or technology). Ogburn developed the theory of cultural lag mainly in Social Change with Respect to Cultural and Original Nature, published in 1922 (cf. Ogburn 1966). Throughout the book, Ogburn builds the explanatory key to social change, not appealing to the traditional explanation in terms of evolution of inherited mental ability or, as he also calls it, “original nature”. Previously, sociologists emphasized biological factors as variables of social change. However, with the elimination of the biological factor, Ogburn appeals to purely cultural factors to explain social change, and here is where he introduces his theory of cultural lag formulated in the following way:

A cultural lag occurs when one of two parts of culture which are correlated changes before or in greater degree than the other part does, thereby causing less adjustment between the two parts that existed previously. (1966: 96)

According to Ogburn, material culture is the field that changes first and the rest of socio-cultural environments – organizational, axiological, juridical, ideological, etc. – have to adapt to it in order to avoid the temporary maladjustment or the lack of harmony between technology and cultural ambience. However, he recognizes that material culture does not always change as it has before, although in modern societies this is, in fact, the main form of social change – usually the social dimension adjusts to changes in the technological dimension. This means that the several parts of a given culture react with regard to changes at different rates and in different ways. According to Ogburn, this process of adaptation or adjustment of the cultural non-material fields to technology can take a great deal of time, and through that transition what he calls cultural lag takes place; that is to say, a “cultural delay” or “maladjustment” between the new technology and the diverse aspects of the social field. In other words, culture tends to lag behind the advances of technology. Thus, for Ogburn, the explanation of social change in modern societies consists fundamentally in four factors related to the material culture: inventions, accumulation of inventions, their diffusion and the adaptation to them.

This approach implies a “middle” technological determinism (neither “hard nor “soft”), because Ogburn puts the emphasis on a temporary maladjustment. That is to say, technology does not cause a mechanical and instantaneous change, but rather the theory of cultural lag only shows that the technical invention chronologically comes before the subsequent changes in the social field. These social changes then have to adjust to the technological invention. In this sense, there is a “middle” technological determinism because the adjustment has its own rhythm marked by society and not by the technological innovation.

SEE ALSO: Material Culture; Technology, Science, and Culture

REFERENCE

SUGGESTED READING

JESÚS ROMERO MOÑIVAS

cultural relativism

The concept of cultural relativism refers to the idea that one needs to understand all cultures within the context of their own terms (i.e., values, norms, standards, customs, knowledges, lifeways, world-views, etc.) rather than judge them from the perspective of one’s own culture. This ideal of cross-cultural understanding requires an epistemological “suspension” of one’s own cultural biases in order to comprehend an unfamiliar cultural world.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Franz Boas applied the concept of cultural relativism to the theories and methods of anthropology, shifting cross-cultural research from the “armchair” to “the field,” and encouraging his students to engage with the people they studied through the cultural immersion and participant-observation that now characterizes ethnographic fieldwork. Along with the concept of “historical particularism” (the idea that each culture has its own particular history and dialectics), the principles espoused by Boas and his