

CHANGE

One of the great linking themes in post-Enlightenment philosophy, social theory and the arts through the centuries is that of change. Below, I start with Shakespearian drama and the dramatic force of social change in play's like *King Lear*, through the work of early twentieth century thinkers like Carl Jung in *The Undiscovered Self*, and through to the postmodernists, the late modernists and the supermodernists (all discussed elsewhere on this site). What runs in common through all of these works is a perception of change. Change, I would suggest, is the most natural force in the world: at root the relativity principle suggests that all phenomena are relative to another and therefore all in flux. Much social theory is concerned with the Other – that is, theories of how the status quo deals with social forces which are different from the norm. Of course, for there to be any change at all, we must move from the status quo to a state of affairs which is “other” to that status quo. Therefore, if change is central to our social affairs then the incorporation of things which are “other” to our current social organisation are essential to our progress.

The relativity principle

As the architect Buckminster Fuller suggested in *Nine Chains to the Moon* (1938), Einstein's relativity principle demonstrates that physical forces are relative one to another. The energy released is equal, and dependent on, the mass of the object times the speed of light squared. The general theory of relativity demonstrates that even time is a concept relative to indicia of space. One is relative to the other. So, we have $E=MC^2$: this equation expresses the necessary changeability of our reality. It expresses how at the most fundamental level in our physical world all forces are relative to the movements in other forces: it is an equation which expresses the necessary flux in the physical world.

Now a social scientist must be nervous of purporting to draw lessons directly from the natural sciences; but as metaphors, merely, we can create rhetorical platforms for theoretical change. So, I look at much in analytical social theory, particularly that form of legal positivism which is the object of much of this site, which is concerned to construct models which are inflexible and which are incapable of accommodating change – blind, in many instances, to areas of human endeavour which fall outwith the narrow confines of their expertise.

The perpetuity of change

The world has always been changing although technological and social advance may seem to have accelerated the rate of change in the modern period. To writers in almost every era it has seemed that the world was changing seismically. So Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Ben Johnson's *Volpone* both expressed a nervousness with the apparent onset of

a deep moral change in Elizabethan society (on which see AS Hudson, *Understanding Equity & Trusts*, first edition, 2001, p.185) in a way which writers in the late twentieth century (me included) have expressed concern about moral change indicating a turn away from “natural” social norms; for example, Carl Jung’s *The Undiscovered Self* first published in 1957 could easily have been written by any of the social theorists (see the list at [postmodernism](#) and [late modernism](#)) writing at the end of the twentieth century about social change.

So, in my *Understanding Equity & Trusts* (first edition, 2001, p.185), I approached the question of *King Lear* and *Volpone* in the following way:

A number of very famous plays written at the first years of the 17th century marked the great changes which their authors saw in their own societies. I am thinking particularly of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Ben Johnson’s *Volpone*. In *King Lear* we see the old king usurped by the unnatural refusal of his three daughters to respond to his authority in the ways that he expected. The most frequently-used word in the play is the word “nature”. As such, the play focuses on the way in which the characters break free of the natural roles which would otherwise have been expected of them. Shakespeare was writing about his own time: that period of English history in which merchants became more powerful, in which trade became more important, and in which terrible religious wars were fought for the succession to the Crown. As opposed to recognising the need to respect one’s elders, the younger characters in the play are all more concerned with their thirst for money and power – and their preparedness to kill to get what they want.

Similarly, in Ben Johnson’s play *Volpone* the wicked, money-obsessed Volpone (in Italian “the wolf”) and his side-kick Mosca (“the fly”) attempt to fleece a parade of apparently worthy citizens. Each of these worthies are revealed to us as venal, deceitful and money-grabbing individuals who flock to Volpone’s bed-side (as he pretends to be very ill) in the hope of a legacy from his estate. Both these plays have a very contemporary feel because they chart a change in social mores from a respect for higher, ethical values to a focus on the transient, the material and the insubstantial. As we trawl through the dross on our televisions and on the internet searching for something genuinely interesting, we might reflect that our [own era] is going through similar agonies about its morality. ...

So it is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century much of the politics of our age is concerned with finding a “third way” between state-orientated traditionalism and rampant individualism. What is common to the plays written at the turn of the 17th century and to the hand-wringing at the beginning of the 21st century is that they look both to the future and to the past.

“The Other” as the establishment

Whenever there is change, some element which was previously not the status quo becomes the status quo, some person or some idea which was not pre-eminent becomes pre-eminent. So any element which is today capable of being defined as “the other” may

yet become the status quo or may yet become pre-eminent. So the rebels may yet become the establishment. It is not necessary, however, that there be antagonism in the before and after. It may be that the new status quo is the result of a scientific discovery or a consensual change in social relations, rather than that “the other” has won some revolutionary victory over the status quo.

In short, we should embrace change and strategise in such a way that we can accommodate the change which will inevitably come. We must accommodate change by building our social models on principles – not just models but principles to which we can commit – which are such a part of the human condition that we can expect to be perpetually a part of our life.