Agents of Historical Change

The societal processes of transformation explained in Chapter 3, the sociocultural, political, economic, and infomedia processes, represent together the mechanism through which change is introduced and managed in society. Therefore, they are not agents that provoke change and make history but tools to introduce and coordinate change. Nevertheless, no change can be initiated without the involvement of at least one societal process, and no social transformation can be completed without affecting the positions of the other processes. As a consequence, every change, regardless of its nature and magnitude, causes conflict and produces winners and losers, and thus it causes the balance of power relationships in society to change, sometimes drastically.

German philosopher Georg Hegel, as will be explained in more detail in the next chapter, saw freedom as being the “spirit of history” or the agent that motivates people to seek change and cause social progress to be made over time. Hegel was right, but freedom does not explain societal change by itself and thus human progress. Karl Marx, on the other hand, saw class conflict as the major agent of historical change that leads to societal progress. Marx argued that contradictions within the capitalist system precipitate conflict between the capitalist class and the working industrial class, and that the resolution of this conflict creates new syntheses that reduce the intensity of conflict, leading to progress. Since the movement Marx described is supposed to continue until a classless society is reached, one can say that the search for social justice represents the spirit of history for Karl Marx. Marx was right in arguing that class conflict causes change, but class conflict cannot by itself explain societal transformations and human progress over time. Max Weber saw ethics and work ethics in particular as being a major agent of change that motivates people to work hard, save money, and invest, and thus cause progress to be made.
Weber was also right, but ethics cannot by themselves move history and cause society to be fundamentally transformed.

Paul Kennedy argues that technological developments and social transformations are the forces responsible for human progress. Kennedy, however, does not explain what causes technological developments and social transformations. Despite the importance of Kennedy’s argument, he, just like the other philosophers of history, misses other important agents that have contributed and continue to contribute to causing change and making societal progress. Jared Diamond suggests that geography has had a decisive impact on people’s lives and fortunes, and argues that humans, with the domestication of certain animals and the farming of wild crops, were able to take the first step toward civilization. Agricultural production, he argues further, leads to food surpluses, which support sedentary societies, rapid population growth, and division of labor, which means societal change and progress.

Agents of historical change are many, and every one of them gets an opportunity to influence societal life and cause change. However, how societies are organized, and in which stage of societal development they live and the nature of the environment that surrounds them give certain agents more opportunities to lead and instigate change than others. Thus, the agents that move history and cause progress differ from one place to another, and their roles vary from one societal setting to another. There is no doubt that geography, freedom, technology, ethics, and class conflict have played and continue to play important roles in societal life, but the role of each force was eclipsed at one time or another by the roles played by one or more of the other forces. I believe that the major agents that represent the spirit of history and cause change and progress over time are the following:

1. The development of the institution of private property;
2. The accumulation of capital which led to competition between individuals and business entities;
3. Technological developments and scientific discoveries, particularly those related to manufacturing, communications, transportation, and the making of tools;
4. New modes of economic production, which led to changing production relations and causing class conflict;
5. Sociocultural transformation, particularly in regard to traditions and attitudes toward work, time, the other, and nature; and
6. Man’s continuous struggle and longing for freedom, particularly individual and political freedoms, and freedoms of speech and worship.