If you could use only six words, how would you describe your life? F. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Great Gatsby*, wistfully suggested that he and his wife, Zelda, would write, “For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.” One of my students, Joe Hampton, penned, “No plan. Hope it works out.” Trying to compose a phrase that captures or summarizes a life is a challenge. Life is long (we hope) and full of twists and turns. As the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” Our plans, sacrifices, character, perseverance, and common sense help take us where we want to go, but the road was not built by us, nor do we have control over the traffic lights and detours. That is why, in part, the study of society is so important.

We live in a world that could easily go about its business without us, and we leave the world with surprisingly little consequence, especially given all the effort we expend to become who we are. Whenever I arrive at a faraway destination, my first thought is that life there would be absolutely the same if I had missed my flight: taxis whizzing by, church bells ringing, school children rushing down the street, people in shops looking over goods to buy, friends embracing. I think, “I might as well be a ghost,” until someone turns and asks if they can help me.

This is the mystery and marvel of studying social change. The human world in all its political, economic, cultural, biological, linguistic, and demographic complexity has been constructed over thousands of years and remains a work in progress. In that time, human beings for several
Ways of Social Change

thousands of generations have been born, lived and died, making little or no lasting individual contribution to the social order. They are long forgotten by history. Still, they did have their moment, and the world would be slightly different had they not lived. In their totality, there would be no social world, no culture, no economy, no political system, no war, and no religion if these seemingly insignificant and nameless millions had not lived.

Wait a minute! What about Moses and Abraham, Christ and Mohammed, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Confucius? What about Genghis Kahn, Nefertiti, Christopher Columbus, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Hannibal, Napoleon, queens Elizabeth I and Victoria, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong? What about Socrates and Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, Emily Dickinson, Charles Darwin, Pablo Picasso, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Madam Curie, Mohandas Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela? Who would we be without Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Martin Luther King Jr.? These people and many, many others left their mark; they changed the way we live, think, and see the world. Their visions and efforts altered the course of social life, science, law, religious thought, economics, war, and peace.

True enough, but not alone and not only by dint of their brilliance, egomania, determination, and special gifts does society change. They, too, lived in a particular social world in which their efforts could be successful, even as their actions and ideas disrupted the taken-for-granted order of things. The changes historically attached to their lives can only be understood by taking a longer and wider view of the social world in which they lived. It is the confluence of biography and history, the personal and the public, private efforts and the social milieu, that allows us to understand social change.¹

A Twentieth-Century Life: Iris Summers

Iris Summers is no one special. She lived a very normal life for her times, but the times changed greatly, and for the most part Iris changed with them. She never talked about social change and would never have considered herself an advocate for change. She was careful with her money (what little she had) and tried to be prepared for life’s inevitable setbacks. She believed that some

¹The work of C. Wright Mills guides the perspective that seeks to locate private issues in public history, or what he called “the sociological imagination” (Mills 1959).
things—expressed as aphorisms and maxims—were always true. For example, “A fool and his money are soon parted.” Or, “Still waters run deep.” And she often quoted maxims when giving advice, like, “Look before you leap.” Or, “Never look a gift horse in the mouth.” She thought these were always useful, no matter who you were or what was going on in the world.

But what happened around and to Iris Summers greatly affected her life and the way she lived. Her life both reflects and makes manifest social change over nearly a century.

She had her children in the decade following the Second World War. These babies joined the twentieth-century Baby Boomers, bought rock ’n’ roll records, and screamed in excitement at the sight of Elvis Presley and, later, the Beatles on TV’s Ed Sullivan Show. They became the ’60s Generation who joined the ongoing civil rights movement and fought in Vietnam. Many of them protested the war, experimented with drugs, believed in equal rights for women, and became disillusioned with the American Dream of unlimited abundance and personal consumption. They were followed by Generation X and then the current Millennial Generation, but their large numbers and the social tumult of their formative years made Iris’ children feel like they were somehow special and the century’s agents of social change.

Sociologist James Davis would disagree: “We tend to think of a conservative, rigid society suddenly modernized by a rebellious post-World War II youth.” He finds the opposite: “…the strikingly modernized cohorts are those born in the first half of the century . . . [T]he rate of change in the social climate [after WWII] is, if anything, less than that for its predecessor” (Davis 1996: 165). Iris Summers was of that earlier era, and it is her life that tells so much about social change in modern times.

From Farm to Factory

Like many of your grandparents and great grandparents, Iris Summers was born on a farm. Literally, she was born in her parents’ bed in the house on the farm, delivered by a woman from a nearby town who had some training and a lot of experience helping women in labor. Birth on the farm—calves, colts, piglets, chicks, pups, and kittens—was an everyday event. The first pictures of Iris were taken in a photo studio, but there are many pictures of her and her family on their farm. When she was a girl, the family had a Kodak Brownie camera, a mass-produced device marketed in 1900 that...
allowed her generation to be the first in human history to have a visual record of everyday life preserved for posterity.²

Just about everyone Iris knew lived on a farm. When she was born, small-scale agriculture was the work of millions of people. Across the nation twice as much energy was used by agriculture as was used in manufacturing. During her childhood, half of all Americans could say they lived or had lived on farms, but that was rapidly changing. Farm foreclosures were common in the 1920s, even before the Great Depression of the 1930s. Small family farms were consolidated into larger farms that spurred rural-to-urban migration and set the stage for the onset of industrial agriculture. By the end of the twentieth century—at the end of Iris’ life—agriculture employed fewer than one in fifty American workers.

“In 1992 people were, on average, four-and-a-half times richer than their great-grandparents at the turn of the century,” according to Alan Thein (1992: 23). Iris grew up poor. But then, most people were poor by any measure of material consumption used today. Her family bought a car, a black Model T, just like many of their neighbors, when she was in her teens. It was not long after they had gotten a battery-powered radio. Their home had running water in the kitchen, from a catchment built by her father, but there was no hot water for bathing or washing dishes other than what could be heated in a large kettle on the stove. As long as the house stood, it never had a bathroom; an outhouse several yards off the back porch served the purpose. Soon after she left the farm, electricity lines were strung across the countryside and hooked up to the house. This was part of the rural electrification program—a stimulus program of the federal government to get the nation’s economy out of the Great Depression and a major reason farming and rural life changed so much in the twentieth century.

In the 1940s, telephone lines were installed, though several families shared a “party line” with her parents. Every household had its specific ring, and people were expected to not listen in on each others’ conversations. Many years after Iris left home, the wood-burning stove was replaced by a gas range. The farmhouse was old and poorly built, however, and when farms were being bought up to make way for larger farms in the 1950s, it

²In 1888, George Eastman coined the name Kodak and marketed a camera that took one hundred pictures. When finished, owners sent $10 and the entire camera to the Eastman Kodak Company. They received back the prints and a newly loaded camera. This was popular but only affordable by the more affluent. In 1900, Eastman marketed the Brownie for $1 plus fifteen cents for a six-exposure role of film that could be removed and mailed in for developing. In the first year of sales, a quarter million Brownie cameras were sold. Photography had come to the masses.
was torn down along with many of the neighbors’ houses, barns, and equipment sheds. Orchards were leveled and lanes were plowed into fields.

Iris left home when she was a young woman and lived her adult life in small towns. She always described her two years living in a city as “purgatory.” She loved to garden and knew how to preserve food, mostly by canning. She could butcher a chicken and make clothes by sewing and knitting, but many of the skills required of her parents to maintain their farm household were of little use to her. She needed a formal education and a degree that qualified her for specific work in a job, one that had not existed a few years before.

When Iris’ parents, Herm and Edna, were too old to farm, and the children had left home, they too moved to town. Five years after the 1935 Social Security Act was passed, they began receiving a modest income that continued for the rest of their lives. As poor farmers, there had been little opportunity to save for retirement, and they would otherwise have depended on their grown children for financial help, just the same as had their parents and grandparents. Herm developed “hardening of the arteries,” what we would now diagnose as cardiovascular disease, and died soon after leaving the farm. Edna, however, lived to be 93, spending most of her life in a twentieth century that she increasingly didn’t understand or really care much about.

Iris married Frank Summers soon after he had a steady job that could support a family. Even though it was the decade of the Great Depression, Frank began working full time when he finished high school and became a skilled laborer. He was soon making a good wage, the criterion for his generation to marry and start a family. All his life he could never understand why young people would marry before they were economically secure, or why those with jobs would remain single. This compact in an affluent society between work, marriage, and family would begin to break down for Frank and Iris’ grandchildren in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Unlike later wars in Korea and Vietnam, the draft (conscription into the military) excluded young men working in sectors of the economy deemed important to the war effort, including agriculture and petroleum production. Frank worked in the oil fields, but he and Iris didn’t sit out the war. Along with millions of others, they planted a victory garden and purchased war bonds to help underwrite the country’s debt from military expenses. Like all Americans, they were subject to rationing and restrictions on what they could purchase: foodstuffs like sugar and cocoa; automobile products including oil and rubber tires; and household items. Much of the country’s manufacturing was enlisted to produce military equipment and supplies, not unlike much of the rest of the world, though
on a lesser scale than in Britain, Germany, Japan, and other nations prior to and during the Second World War.

Frank Summers, too, was born on a farm and grew up learning the skills and acquiring the habits of mind of rural families. His paternal grandfather was born during slavery and had fought in the Civil War. His grandpa would have been astonished by the mechanization of agriculture during Frank’s early youth. The great transformation of American agriculture began about the time Iris and Frank were growing up. Animal traction—plowing, hauling, and harvesting with animals—gave way in those years to tractors and trucks with internal combustion engines. In time, the implements pulled by the tractor would be fitted with their own sources of power and grow to be huge and expensive, capable of working far more land in a single day than Iris and Frank’s childhood farms combined. Farms would cease producing food to be eaten by the family. Instead, crops were grown to be sold, and the money was used to buy groceries and everything else the family needed.

Electricity, the cost of land, and agricultural technology and the reduction in human labor that accompanied it dramatically changed the rural landscape, a phenomenon repeated throughout much of the industrialized world in the twentieth century. It was thought that, in time, all countries would produce food in a similar industrial fashion, becoming the model for rural development in poorer countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia that gained their independence after midcentury. Along with mechanization came increasing hybridization of plants and the development and widespread use of chemicals, many made from petroleum, to stimulate plant growth, kill weeds, and eliminate insect pests. By the end of the twentieth century, the genetic material in seeds was being modified. This technology was a byproduct of one of the most important scientific discoveries of the century, the unmasking of the genetic code underlying the evolution of all life forms.

Iris had six brothers and sisters and fifteen aunts and uncles, all but one who had children. Her husband, Frank, had an equivalent number of siblings, and so did his mother and father. As a result, both Iris and Frank had cousins by the dozens. Though nearly all of them—aunts, uncles, mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters, and cousins—were born and raised on farms, only a couple of cousins were farming by the middle of the twentieth century. Most of the others had joined the urban workforce in industries and services producing the things that distinguished Iris Summers’ life from those who had come before her.

Extending the Reach

In terms of material goods, Iris shared the century’s prosperity. So much changed: the growth of businesses and thousands of new occupations; cities
ringed with endless suburbs; the ability to travel and communicate over long distances; the scope of war and preparations for conflict; and the vast globalization of trade and manufacturing, including the spread of Western popular culture and political systems modeled after those of the United States and European nations. The map of the world displayed the transformation of empires into independent national states, especially in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. International organizations like the agencies of the United Nations and the World Bank were playing an increasingly important role in coordinating relations among nations. The pursuit of science vastly increased the range of interventions in health, from inoculations to organ transplants. Plate tectonics transformed geology, and the discovery of the double helix opened a panorama to knowledge about how biological life reproduces and changes.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics changed how people thought about not only space and time but also “the way we think about almost everything, not only in physics but in chemistry and biology and philosophy . . . about cause and effect, about past and future, about facts and probabilities” (Dyson 2010: 20). In short, everything from the vast universe to nanoparticles and the unseen subatomic world. Space travel and the photographs it generated opened up the universe to radically new understandings of what Iris called “out there” as well as an appreciation for Mother Earth as a beautiful and fragile environment.

The amount of knowledge and technology in her lifetime grew exponentially. This, and the ideas of human and social improvement impelling much of the work of engineers, scientists, and practitioners, increased the human capacity to affect what to earlier generations had been taken for granted and beyond the reach of human intervention, from weather to mental health, from old age to social inequality. William Gamson sums this up well: “[T]he major thrust of social change in the United States has been to subject more and more forces to the manipulation of conscious decisions.” This is true not only in democracies with capitalist economies but across the world (Gamson 1968: 189).

Medical science, civil engineering, theoretical physics, information technology, and sciences whose names and province completely escaped Iris Summers contributed to making the products that became part of everyday

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3The commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office in 1899, Charles H. Duell, is reputed to have offered to close the patent office in the belief that all useful devices and inventions had been patented. There is no evidence that he actually said this, but it was a staple of prideful talk in reference to the abundance of inventions and new technologies of the twentieth century.
life in affluent countries. The landscape of poor countries, too, was changed by the desire of their own people to follow suit, along with multinational corporations’ efforts to find raw materials, new markets, and sites for manufacture and assembly.

Wars and civil conflicts throughout the century were often linked to economic and political transformations. Warfare was greatly influenced by changing technologies. Aircraft, armor, communication, and logistics made previously impossible forms of warfare possible. At the same time, nuclear weapons—developed in order to pose such a grave threat that their use would be inconceivable—anchored the Cold War divide following World War II. The growth of national states and the extension of the reach of the state reflected shared ideas about progress, incubated ethnic conflicts, and fueled the powerful privately owned economic organizations—corporations—that increasingly linked people around the world.

Generations of Stability and Change

When growing up, Iris lived near many of her relatives, and her cousins were among her closest friends and playmates. Nearly every Sunday during her childhood relatives gathered at the farm where Iris grew up. Most of what they ate was grown on the farm: fresh fruit and vegetables in season, canned and dried goods otherwise; meat they butchered; and bread from the flour of wheat they grew. Ice cream was churned by hand using ice cut from the river months before and stored under hay deep in the cellar. Sunday afternoons were spent playing with cousins and, for the adults, in conversation or card games. Relatives would stay into the evening, drinking, smoking, and listening to the radio. Some helped with evening chores like milking the cows and feeding the chickens, pigs, and horses. This bucolic life was full

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4“The state” as a driver of social change is the topic of Chapter 8, but to avoid misunderstanding at the outset it should be pointed out that the term, as used by social scientists, is a shorthand reference to the system of power administered by governments. These include local, state, and federal governments that “speak in the name of the state and [are] formally invested with state power” (Miliband 1969: 50). Michael Mann, following the ideas of Max Weber, recognizes two dimensions of the state: the institutional and the functional, i.e., what states are and what states do. “The state contains four main elements, being: (1) a differentiated set of institutions and personnel embodying (2) centrality in the sense that political relations radiate outwards from a center to cover (3) a territorially demarcated area, over which it exercises (4) a monopoly of authoritative binding rule-making backed up by a monopoly of the means of physical violence” (Mann 1988: 4, italics in the original).
of hardships and hard work, making the periodic abundance and leisure of Sundays seem all the more special.

Daily life was not terribly different from that of her parents and grandparents when they were young. Some of Iris’ forbears didn’t approve of card playing, and a few made their own libations—cider, beer, and whiskey—instead of buying them. Rather than a radio, music was provided by local amateurs, including household members. If you went back into her family record far enough, you would find more food of a distinct ethnicity or region of the world, and the people would be speaking a different language: German, Gaelic, and Norwegian rather than English. Everyone had been farmers. Some of the machinery changed, and more work was done using the power of horses and mules. But it was a difficult and precarious life.

Iris’ grandparents on her father’s side were from Germany before it was Germany. That is, they lived in an autocratic state that was primarily Lutheran and would later be incorporated into Prussia when King Wilhelm and his chancellor, Ludwig Von Bismarck, embarked on German unification. Letters from the old country told of impending war and young men being pressed into the army. The bell and iron fence of a Catholic church were melted down and forged into a cannon, and many of the peasants—especially the Catholics—quietly packed up their farms and fled the region, becoming immigrants in a new land.

Her mother’s family had been in the country longer than her father’s, though some relatives lived in Canada for three and four generations after first coming to the United States. Her relatives had been horse and mule breeders, masons, and house builders. Others were wheelwrights who built wagons and carts, but all of them had a farm to produce most of what they needed. Iris and her husband had distant relatives with names like Chandler (probably candle makers), Newhouse (perhaps the family with a new house), Rakestraw, Smith (blacksmith), Mason, Miller, Skinner, and Waggoner.

Names tell a story of social change. The practice of adopting a family name often indicates the point at which an increasingly strong state wants to keep track of its citizens, usually to tax them or conscript them into war. Family names change with changing family circumstances. A Norwegian family in 1850 might buy the Skjervem family’s farm and henceforth take the name Skjervem. Persian, Hindi, or Chinese immigrants,

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5Curiously, the most common family name in the United States is Smith. The most common name in Hungary is Kovacs (blacksmith), and in Germany is Schmidt (blacksmith). I’ve often wondered if blacksmiths were particularly prolific or if there were just so many of them. Every village needed a blacksmith.
among others, had their name altered when they came to the United States in order for them to sound and be spelled in a way recognizable by people who spoke only English. People whose names identified them with a disfavored nationality or ethnic group changed their names to avoid discrimination and prejudice.

The names of the world’s boxing champions tell the story of social change, in particular the story of immigration and upward social mobility. The point at which a prominent ethnic group’s names disappear from the list of prizefighters is a rough approximation of when the ethnic group “made it in America.” First were the Irish and Scottish (John L. Sullivan, Jack Dempsey, and Bob Fitzsimmons), followed by Jews (Barney Ross and Benny Leonard/Benjamin Liener) and Italians (Rocky Graziano, Carmen Basilio, Rocky Marciano, Jack LaMotta, and Ray Mancini), a century of African American boxers (Jack Johnson, Harry Wills, Joe Lewis, Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier, Sugar Ray Robinson, Emile Griffith, and Sugar Ray Leonard) and most recently Latino boxers (John Ruiz, Paulie Ayala, Steve Curry, and Tony Lopez). Both of the latter groups have yet to achieve equity in American society and continue to have many fighters in the ring.

In the United States, women have gone through generational cycles of keeping their family names at marriage. Supporters of women’s equality who married in the 1960s and 1970s were much more likely to keep their names or hyphenate their own and their husbands’ family names than were women marrying in recent decades, the time of third-wave feminism. Following the civil rights movement, ethnic pride among African Americans contributed to an upsurge in creative, often melodic, first names, while conversion to another faith (e.g., from Christianity to Islam or the Nation of Islam) signaled an important social, and sometimes political, trend. No one could miss the point being made by the great prizefighter Cassius Clay when he became Muhammad Ali, when the fiery orator and Black Power activist Malcolm Little became Malcolm X, or when the poet, dramatist, and critic LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka.

“Waves of feminism” describes the evolution of the women’s movement that has realized considerable success in changing laws and social policies (especially suffrage for first-wave feminism) and the passage of equal-opportunity legislation such as Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, as amended in 1972 (for second-wave feminism). Succeeding generations (third-wave feminism) take much of this for granted and see the pursuit of women’s equality in a different light by focusing on new issues (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006).
Decades of Social Movements

Iris Summers never marched in the streets or waved a sign, and only rarely did she contribute to a political candidate or cause. She was an observer, like most people, and watched from the sidelines as younger, more confident, and more passionate advocates sought public attention for their causes. Her friends and relatives were not activists and would have found it peculiar if she had become deeply involved or even enthusiastic about political affairs. News came to her in slim local newspapers and short television broadcasts each evening rather than via cable news and across the Internet. She had a positive opinion about social change accomplished through actions of the state, given her experiences as a young woman, but in her last years she was disquieted by the loud voices demanding state action for and against social change.

It wasn’t that her generation avoided public controversy by working for social change. It was during her young-adult years that American labor was most successful as a social movement, leading to the creation of the United Auto Workers, the unionization of the country’s coal miners and longshoremen, and the establishment of the Congress of Industrial Organization. At the height of the Great Depression, hundreds of people camped out on the Washington Mall in protest of government inaction to stem the financial collapse that put them out of work and shrunk their life’s savings. Well before the 1950s and ’60s, the seminal years of court and legislative victories, the civil rights movement was active in opposing racial segregation and other forms of discrimination against African Americans. Iris, however, was never a visible part of any of this.

As she got older, the diversity of lifestyle of her children, nieces, and nephews, and their strong opinions and beliefs, helped convince her that the U.S. war in Southeast Asia was a mistake, that unfair treatment experienced by gays and lesbians should not be permitted, that women should have equal rights, and that local, state, and the federal governments should take a more active role in helping the disadvantaged. Her memory of poverty, farm foreclosures, and unemployment gave her a sense that personal problems weren’t just for lack of trying. There was racism, sexism, and discrimination; political opportunism and demagoguery; and a lot of things that needed changing. Like most women her age, she held opinions, but she largely kept them to herself.

Public safety campaigns and social movements to change behavior had mixed results with Iris Summers. Antismoking campaigns never fazed her, but she quickly supported the Keep America Beautiful antilitter campaign to
stop the way people casually threw trash out their car windows.\textsuperscript{7} She was very uncomfortable using seat belts. Though aware of the statistics on seat belt safety and auto collision injuries, Iris believed she would be burned alive if, in a collision, she couldn’t unfasten the seat belt in time to escape. She and her husband, Frank, never built a bomb shelter, despite the public announcements in the 1950s and urgings of their neighbors. Nor did she join the antinuclear movement or visibly protest corporate malfeasance by boycotting a company or product. She approved of what many social movements of her life accomplished, but she was largely a bystander.

When her children and younger relatives talked with her about their social and political concerns, she would describe how families used to take care of one another when someone needed help. She could recount how same-sex teachers lived together and, though some people may have suspected a homosexual relationship, this was a private matter and not something needing public discussion. She would tell them, perhaps naively, that in her day the races didn’t want to mix, but since young people felt differently, she supposed it was all right.

As a girl, Iris Summers had regularly gone to church, but she stopped attending in her early adult years. With the birth of her children, she decided to return to church and expose them to religion, but she was only partially successful. After their children left home, she and Frank never attended church or gave it much thought. This was somewhat unusual, inasmuch as most elderly people of their generation resumed the practices of religion on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{8} Several of Iris’ grandchildren, nieces, and nephews became active in fundamentalist congregations that were started in the 1970s and 1980s and considered church attendance and involvement in religious activities an important part of their lives and identities. One very religious granddaughter led the antiabortion movement in her town, but Iris never talked to her about it.

\textsuperscript{7}Heather Rogers’ \textit{Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage} (2005) describes how this campaign was actually a very successful corporate-sponsored effort to define the problem of everyday pollution as a failure of people to properly dispose of trash, deflecting the public’s focus away from the creation of trash by bottling and packaging companies, similar to automobile corporations emphasizing “the nut behind the wheel” discussed in Chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{8}Robert Bellah and his colleagues’ \textit{Habits of the Heart} (1985) provides a well-researched examination of religious practices and commitment to personal as well as organized religion in the United States. They profile Americans who follow a typical pattern of identifying themselves as “having religion” but deciding for themselves many of the details and practices that best express what they believe, not what the clergy or a congregation dictates.
The Means to Being Modern

Iris Summers thought the best thing to happen in her lifetime was television. It opened a world to her and her family that otherwise they would have never known. Entertainers like Jack Benny and Dinah Shore, performing artists like Van Cliburn, Arthur Miller’s dramas, *National Geographic* specials, situation comedies, and the evening news became a major part of her adult experience. She learned things, developed an appreciation for the arts, and became more socially aware because she watched television.

Less well understood or recognized by Iris, she became a member of that great consuming army who discovered through television things they never knew they needed. Though she retained the frugality of her background—and especially her experience with the prolonged worldwide economic depression of the 1930s—she spent much of her life considering, figuring out if she could afford, working in order to have, and purchasing *things*. She was a practical person and not terribly swayed by advertising, or so she thought. Fortunately for her, advertising was far less sophisticated in her middle adult years than by the end of the century.

Hers was an era of rising expectations that saw the U.S. economy grow steadily. The per capita gross domestic product (GDP) doubled between the birth of her first child and high school graduation of her last. Across the globe, economies grew, and following the destruction brought by each world war, Europe’s economies also boomed. Dozens of poor countries and newly independent nations were able to link their economies to this growth, and their people experienced a similar shifting of their everyday lives—toward the acquisition of things.

Iris Summers was a lifelong smoker, though men were much more likely than women to smoke for all but the last decades of the twentieth century. She never gave it up or even seriously tried to stop smoking, though it seemed obvious to her that smoking harmed a person’s health. She believed the health statistics that told her that life was shortened by smoking, but she didn’t really believe in the danger of secondhand smoke. On trips, she cracked her car window, no matter the weather, only in response to her family’s complaints. She started smoking not because it was part of the glamour of Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart and Greta Garbo but because her friends and husband smoked and seemed to enjoy it. Once addicted, Iris liked to smoke, and her last breath wasn’t far removed from her last cigarette.

A Woman in a Changing Society

The expectations for most young women of Iris Summers’ generation were fairly simple: marry, bear children, be a faithful and supportive wife, and do
whatever it takes to give your children a good chance in life. That meant knowing how to cook, clean, and care for everyday illnesses, having a nice yard, and being a good neighbor. Though never affluent, she knew she was lucky. Her husband, Frank, was a steady provider, was never seriously hurt on the job, and remained her husband until he died. Not so for her children or her siblings. When her sister Ruth’s husband was killed in a hunting accident, life’s difficulties for a single mother seemed unavoidable and often insurmountable. Ruth’s family of four quickly plunged into poverty that was relieved only when Ruth again married and became the mother of her new husband’s children. Their “blended family” seemed unusual, especially when compared to what was portrayed in the early days of television, but in fact was not atypical of families throughout history, including the late twentieth century.

As a woman, things had been much the same for Iris Summers as they’d been for her mother and aunts. Times were very different, however, for her daughters and granddaughters. By 1980, it was clear that most American families could not maintain a middle-class lifestyle on only one income. Europe, and especially Eastern and Central Europe, had found this out after the Second World War. In Iris’ early years and in other countries, especially in agrarian societies, women worked alongside men and often put in longer hours than their male counterparts. The idea in the Victorian era that women should not be employed outside the home was, in hindsight, a brief interlude and a possibility for only the relatively affluent in capitalist societies. Women were enlisted into the paid workforce during both World Wars I and II. By the 1980s, women of all social classes were increasingly likely to be working in order to help support themselves and their families.

Wives and mothers of Iris’ generation were not idle just because they weren’t working outside the home. In fact, they were spending an increasing amount of time on housework, chauffeuring children to school, shopping, and other household activities. Of course, single women and women who headed families, and especially nonwhite females, have always worked outside the home in numbers greater than married women, but the numbers increased for wives as well. In 1950, 32 percent of all adult women between age eighteen and sixty-five were in the paid workforce. This increased to 60 percent in 2000.

The women’s movement rightfully takes credit for women increasingly seeking careers beyond that of wife and mother. But even as women became

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9 Actually knowing the impact of social movements is often difficult to ascertain. Sarah Soule and her colleagues (Soule et al. 1999) have raised some interesting questions about the women’s movement as a force for fair employment legislation, with suggestive analysis that women’s increased workforce participation was the driving force, not the women’s movement itself.
the majority of medical school students and were entering legal and scientific professions in ever larger numbers, the quality of most people’s working lives—women included—declined (Sennett 1998). And still the rate of women working outside the home increased. Wage earners on average saw no increase in earnings over the last quarter of the twentieth century, and per capita income declined with the Great Recession of 2007–2010.

As a young woman Iris studied to be a nurse. She was a poor young woman who, like many of her social class, could receive a nursing education in exchange for working in the hospital where she was trained and lived. Work was scarce when she finished her education, however, and she soon married and began traveling with her husband as he went from jobsite to jobsite. Only when her children were well into school did she return to work, and then only part time.

Her daughters and granddaughters had no such luxury. They always worked outside the home, full time and for their entire adult lives. If she had suggested to her granddaughters that they should take some years away from work to raise a family, they would have found this a curious idea and largely impossible. There was a steady growth in educational attainment in Iris’ family\(^\text{10}\) and great pride in both educational and occupational accomplishments. When President Bill Clinton talked about people who “work hard and play by the rules,” Iris felt he was talking about her family. This didn’t mean that everything went smoothly, however.

Five of Iris’ six children married, and three divorced. That was about average for their generation, and today. Her children moved many times for their jobs or in search of work, to do military service, go to college, or just out of wanderlust. They ultimately settled too far away to make it easy to visit Iris and Frank on weekends, so holidays, vacations, and close relatives’ weddings and funerals became the times she occasionally saw her children and grandchildren. When Iris died, most relatives of her generation who were still living traveled fewer than a hundred miles to attend the funeral. Her children took flights in order to be there.

The Changing World of Work

As the years passed, what looked like a good job became more difficult to find. Global competition, deteriorating industrial plants, corporate downsizing and human resource practices, and the declining power of labor

\(^{10}\)This follows the trend for the United States as a whole. Less than 5 percent of college-age youth were in college in the 1920s. This number was 15 percent by 1949, in part due to the GI Bill, and is nearly 60 percent today.
unions combined to create job losses and wage stagnation that changed the way people in the United States lived and the prospects for their children. The labor market changed with the growth of information technology. An aging population’s health care needs created new jobs as part of the economy’s shift from the production of things to the provision of services.

Like many others from rural backgrounds, Iris had no experience with labor unions. Her husband, Frank, alternated between ambivalence and skepticism when the idea of joining a union came up. Only a small fraction of American workers were members of unions in 1900, nearly all of whom were skilled craftsmen. When things became very difficult for working people in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the federal government responded to labor unrest by passing legislation that made it easier to form unions, negotiate agreements with owners, and improve workers’ pay, health, and retirement benefits. By 1956, nearly two in five workers in the United States belonged to unions, and the conditions for nonunion workers improved correspondingly. By midcentury, U.S. workers were the best paid in the world. Corporate America clawed back, however, especially with the passage of the Davis-Bacon Act in 1948 and incremental pro-business legislation through the Reagan years of the 1980s and beyond. In 1980, one in five workers were union members, but by 2009 less than one worker in eight (fewer than fifteen million workers) belonged to a union.11

More importantly, the decline in unions was the result of a shifting labor market. Just as agricultural work diminished in the first half of the century, industrial work shrank in the second half. Many of the jobs that were the heart of the American labor movement went overseas, and in their place were service jobs, from retail sales and other low-skilled jobs to positions requiring college and professional degrees, few of which were unionized.

Women, too, were joining the labor force in ever-larger numbers, more often than not in service jobs and in nonunionized manufacturing and assembly plants. By century’s end, women began moving into all branches of work, their faces gradually becoming more common in the newspapers’ business section. Their place in science and medicine is no longer remarkable. Women are now more than 50 percent of those working full time in managerial and professional positions in the United States, though they are paid, on average, 72 percent of what males earn (BLS 2009).

11In 2010, the portion of the total U.S. workforce that belonged to unions (11.9 percent) was the lowest in more than seventy years. Private-sector workers in unions fell to 7.1 million, or 6.9 percent. For the first time, more than half of all union members were public employees, 7.6 million or 36.2 percent: teachers, police officers, and so forth (BLS 2011).
The Personal Challenge of Social Change

The Second World War was a watershed in Iris Summers’ life, but in ways that Iris did not always recognize or understand. It was not the only major event that helped forge her worldview, but the changes in global power and economic might that shifted to the United States vastly changed the world in which she lived. While the war’s end was a cause for great celebration, in some ways the United States remained at war. The federal budget deficit, created to pay for the war, declined, but the cost of being a global military power—which the United States became—and the Cold War with the Soviet Union required huge outlays of tax dollars. It seemed, however, that the country could afford it.

Much has been written about the “Age of Conformity” following the Second World War. The movie The Best Years of Our Lives swept the Academy Awards in 1946 by telling a realistic and painful story of returning GIs, but quickly Hollywood began producing hero stories that glossed over the complex realities of war and wartime. Best-selling novels like Man in the Grey Flannel Suit and books like William Whyte’s Organization Man seemed to describe the norms of conformity, complacency, and material satisfaction, while Ayn Rand found a large audience with her novels of heroic individualists in the shadows of sinister governments. Against the grain, books like Peyton Place and early rock ‘n’ roll found large audiences and challenged the myth of conformity, setting off a national debate about public morality, freedom of expression, and the cultural bonds that defined the nation. It became increasingly difficult to locate “the mainstream” and assume a common outlook and purpose in a nation of 250 million people.

Perhaps because several of her children came of age in the 1960s, Iris Summers was greatly aware of the events of that decade. The war in Vietnam and Cambodia changed many of the ways Iris looked at the world. It was the first televised war. Walter Cronkite, the iconic newsman who presented the CBS Evening News, provided the “body count” on a nightly basis, reminding viewers that hundreds of young men and women were dying every week. The Pentagon compared these numbers to the reported number of enemy killed as a measure of the war’s success. This interplay of military violence and nearly instant communication was a dramatic new reality, changing how wars were to be carried out and publicly understood in the decades ahead.

Iris Summers was at a loss when the modern civil rights movement took off in the mid-1950s. She had grown up in a white world. She had never had a neighbor or friend who was African American, and few of her husband’s workmates were ethnic minorities. She had never liked hearing racial slurs
and jokes, believing they were hateful and meant to hurt and demean people. But she didn’t comprehend the deep sense of injustice African Americans felt. She had difficulty understanding the commitment with which civil rights activists pursued the cause of racial justice. Watching the marches on TV and hearing the speeches of leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King and Shirley Chisholm, she would ask her children, “Why do they keep saying, ‘I want to be free’? This is a free country, isn’t it?”

Probably like millions of nonminority people, Iris’ thinking about race and civil rights followed a crooked path, and small things had a great impact on her. The 1956 movie _Imitation of Life_, with its parallel stories of a mother and daughter—one white, one black—touched her deeply. She loved Scott Joplin’s music and watching Sammy Davis Jr. tap dance. She thought Jackie Robinson was a truly brave individual. And when she watched Bull Connor and his police force, along with chanting and cursing crowds of Whites, taunt and attack civil rights marchers, she believed she knew whose side she was on. Four little girls blown up in a Birmingham, Alabama, church and the murders of civil rights workers like Viola Luizzo and Medgar Evers touched her heart. She began that long road so many of her generation had to travel, rethinking not only the rights of African Americans but the everyday relations among people in an increasingly diverse society.

When Iris was older, she and Frank lived on social security and a small pension from Frank’s last job. They had always been frugal, and it suited their lifelong habits to buy little more than what they needed. Her children described this as a consequence of their having lived through the Great Depression, empirically verified in Glenn Elder’s _Children of the Great Depression_. While they were growing up, there were many arguments in the household about money. It seemed to her children that they lived poorer than they really were. In order to have what they wanted, her children had to get jobs. Much of the post-World War II affluence that came to the United States, and in the next decades to Europe and Japan, affected Iris’ approach to life very little. Certainly, looking back at her childhood, she had left behind what Clair Brown (1994) describes as “the bleakness of everyday material life” of most working-class and farm families. Brown’s comparisons of material consumption and household expenses in the early and later years of the twentieth century were true for Iris, Frank, and their children. Like tens of millions of others, they benefited greatly from a rapidly growing economy. By the time their children became adults, the economy had cooled, however, and the promise of doing better than one’s parents continues to pose a challenge to Iris’ grandchildren.

From the analysis of decades of survey data, Norval Glenn (1987) identified “growing individualism” as the “master trend” in postwar
society, made possible by greater affluence and promoted through corporate advertising. Iris was not immune to this, though her personal ambitions remained much as they had been in her formative years. She was fortunate to have the choice of calling her children on the phone, getting in a car and visiting sisters and cousins, and taking time to arrange generations of family photographs in albums. She never quite became the rugged individual so often celebrated in popular culture. Having, helping, and being helped by family and friends was always most important to her.

It could be that, in many ways, the times passed Iris Summers by. When she tried to get a credit card, she was turned down because she had no credit rating, having always paid cash for her purchases. That included their car and the last house she and Frank bought. She paid for things with cash and checks, always knew the exact balance of her checking account, and never used an ATM. While others her age got computers and communicated through e-mail, Iris would rather talk on the telephone (on a land line, not a cell phone) and write letters. She never used a digital camera, let alone a mobile device, to take pictures. She had never heard of social networking, had never Googled information, and the idea of putting speaker buds in her ears to hear music had no appeal.

In the last quarter of the century, as the environmental movement grew with public awareness of the ways human beings were threatening the environment, Iris’ tendency to reuse things most people dispose of, her ability to weave rugs from strips of rags, her distaste for “wasting water” while brushing teeth and for leaving lights on when nobody was around caused her to seem prophetic rather than ancient. Her modest childhood and the deprivation of the Great Depression made her something of a forerunner to green living. Frank was the same way. He composted kitchen scraps and kept his car running to its final demise. He planted grass that required very little watering and preferred to cut it with a push mower.

If everyone lived that way, the economy of the United States and the world would look very different than it does, and many peoples’ idea of happiness would never be realized. But we also know that a lifestyle fueled by nonrenewable resources and financed with borrowed money can also be very problematic. Did social change pass Iris by? Perhaps she missed out on the fads and fashions as well as the revolution in information technology, but the changes in the economic, political, and social fabric were unavoidable. Her resistance to social change was largely on a personal level. Her experience of structural changes was inevitable, and as a consequence, her choices and options, too, grew with the social changes of her lifetime.
Not Every Person’s Story: Capturing Social Change in Personal Experience

Though similar to millions of others, the story of Iris Summers is only one person’s story. She is not an “average American” in the sense of fitting the profile of a statistical average or numerical mode of personal characteristics. For example, by a wide margin Americans lived in cities and suburbs during the last half of the twentieth century, but Iris lived, with the exception of a couple of years, in small towns. Hers is a story of the rural Midwest, not the South, the Southwest, or the West Coast. It is not an immigrant’s story, the story of an African American, or one of an upwardly mobile white man. She didn’t fight in a war or suffer a debilitating injury.

Digital technology and the consumer products it spawned largely passed by Iris Summers’ everyday life. She didn’t have a passport and never traveled to a foreign country, didn’t know a language other than English, nor was she particularly interested in international cuisine. Iris may have experienced discrimination because of her gender, social class, and rural background, but these could not compare to the experiences of those whose life chances were severely restricted and, sometimes, whose personal safety was threatened or violated because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nationality. She was only an occasional observer of these others, and in this way she was like a great many of her fellow citizens.

In Iris Summers’ life can be seen the influences of the historical periods through which she lived. Obvious as well are the consequences of passing through the stages of life. Social change is experienced differently depending upon whether you are young, in your middle years, or elderly. Her peers—the millions of people born early in the century—made up a generation with unique features that placed their own demands on the world around them. They, more than any other generation, shifted from rural lives to industrial and postindustrial work. They used the power of the state to help them succeed, through a public commitment to education, guaranteed loans for home ownership, federally insured bank deposits, and military industries that fueled regional and local economies.

After getting started as adults in the midst of the worst economic crisis of the century, her generation was asked to support and fight the century’s most destructive war. The sustained economic expansion from 1947 to 1970 benefited them at the height of their careers and filled their lives with an abundance of material goods and opportunities. Theirs was the first generation to have a substantial economic safety net of social security to keep most of them out of poverty as senior citizens. When they grew old, their health care was largely paid for through a public health insurance program. They saw
home-town banking shift to powerful Wall Street financial institutions and the stock market go from trading millions of shares daily to billions of shares on a regular basis.

The American labor movement rose and declined in Iris Summers’ lifetime, while the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the public interest movement, the gay rights movement, and other efforts of millions of people and thousands of organizations to create social change emerged and moved the world in new, uncharted directions. Her generation developed a more tolerant attitude than that of their parents and grandparents, and they increasingly lived in a more ethnically diverse and culturally contested environment.

The forces of social change experienced by Iris Summers and those around her are the same ones that impel social change today, not only in the United States but across the globe: social movements, corporate activity, state initiatives, war, and new technology.

Defining and Understanding Social Change

People seek to, and successfully do, redefine themselves. A young person joins the military, hoping to get the structure, respect, and skills that will help her in pursuing a steady, productive life. People marry, divorce, and remarry, establishing relationships and shifting affections that define who they are. Individuals of all ages, but especially youth, decide to live differently. They change their clothes, adopt a new hairstyle, get a tattoo, take up a pastime, and buy things to redefine who they are and how others see them. They try on new identities or publicly assert an identity they claim is theirs.

For most people, what they take to be social change feels very personal and local. A child’s family moves: suddenly there is a new house, new school, and new friends. During the life course, new social circumstances challenge and provide opportunities, doors open while others close behind, and age qualifications are met. Being old enough to go to school, date, leave school, drink alcohol, join the military, drive, vote, retire, and qualify for Medicare and Social Security initiate significant personal changes in an individual’s social circumstances. Personal experiences, however, are a part of something bigger than themselves, something social.

Think for a moment about social change as the sum total of many people’s personal changes. Millions of youth come of age during a massive war that needs soldiers and conscripts hundreds of thousands of young men into the military. Millions of people lose their jobs or leave school and can’t find another job, facing a daunting economic recession or depression that doesn’t
allow most of them to fully use their education and talent. Babies are born during the years of civil rights legislation, stripping away legal barriers to their equal opportunity. Theirs is a vastly different social milieu from that of their parents. They grow up assuming they will vote, pursue an education, get a job, buy a home, and live in a community without overt discrimination toward their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender.

You may have been born into a household full of computers. Information, entertainment, and communication involve sitting in front of a flat screen or walking around with a powerful computer in your hand that takes videos and photos, tells you where you are, talks to you, and links you to friends 24/7. It feels like you, your change. And it is, but it is also happening to millions of others. That’s social change.

Most definitions of social change enumerate the things that are social and the things that change. For example, Wilbert Moore (1972) defines social change as a “significant alteration in social structure” and proceeds to discuss the things that are social structure: groups, organizations, and so forth. Moore’s definition is extended by Harper and Leicht, in their popular textbook *Exploring Social Change*, as “the significant alteration in social structure and cultural patterns through time.”

*Social structure* [is] a persistent network of social relationships where interaction between persons or groups has become routine and repetitive . . . persistent social roles, groups, organizations, institutions, and societies . . . Culture is the shared way of living and thinking that includes symbols and language, . . . knowledge, beliefs, and values, . . . norms, . . . and techniques ranging from common folk recipes to sophisticated technologies and material objects. (Harper and Leicht 2007: 5, italics in original)

Relationships, group norms, beliefs, technologies, and the other things enumerated extend beyond the individual. The idea that social change is an experience differing from what others—at an earlier time—have experienced is incomplete if it does not examine the social processes and networks of relationships surrounding the experiences. They are widely shared, indicating a degree of patterning through the influence of the things that impel both personal and social change in one direction rather than another.

Robert Nisbet (1969: 169) defines social change as “a succession of differences in time within a persistent identity.” What Nisbet means can be seen by comparing Iris Summers and her children’s marriages. Marriage is a “persistent identity,” something Iris and Frank had in common with their children. One “succession of differences” is the greater preponderance of the children’s marriages ending in divorce. What changed? Marital life or, if you like, fidelity
to a marriage. Two or three generations earlier, when women died in high numbers during their childbearing years, men remarried and fathered more children. This changed when maternal health and life expectancy for women improved. Married couples could look forward to many more years together and many more years of possible discord resulting in divorce.

What is causing these personal changes that manifest themselves in the lives of large numbers of people? That is what we want to uncover and in so doing understand the ways of social change.

A Very Brief History of Human Societies
(With Apologies to Mel Brooks)

As a scientific—rather than a speculative—endeavor, understanding social change requires a multidisciplinary approach, combining an interest in culture, social structure, political process, anthropology, and economics, as well as the physical and biological sciences. Foremost, recognizing social change is a venture into history, reconstructing the human record in which can be seen the forces and processes that have configured social life and are likely to impel the future. These are the drivers of social change examined in upcoming chapters. If we hope to work effectively to solve problems of the present and chart a positive future, it is worth taking a moment to examine, however briefly, the key elements of the historical record.

Before the Last Ice Age

Most of what we know about societies, culture, and human accomplishment is in the record of human history following the last Ice Age ten thousand years ago. What we know about earlier human social life before that is very fragmentary. We do know that the species that became today’s humans changed biologically and migrated to populate the habitable portions of the planet. The archeological and anthropological record shows that life changed very, very slowly, but human accomplishments were far from insignificant. Groups fought and probably merged with one other, developed symbolic communication, and established religious practices, group norms, and a sense of identity. Human beings developed pivotal technologies that enhanced their capacity to survive, reproduce, and lay the foundation for what came next.

Isolated family groupings left behind their debris but no written records for many thousands of years. The Paleolithic drawings in the caves of
Lascaux and Trois-Frères in southwestern France are fascinating in both their artistry and the scenes and animals depicted. From them can be inferred a bit about how life must have been lived and how people may have seen themselves and their world almost twenty thousand years ago. Archeological studies of human remains tell something about the religion, adornments, skills and crafts, and occasionally the pleasures of life. Pollen and DNA analysis provide many fascinating facts about the health and nutrition of people before the last Ice Age, but we have only vague clues about their changing social organization and cultural forms.

The corpses found in bogs and glaciers, as well as other more contemporary human remains, fill in some blanks about technologies, practices, and skills, and from these are drawn links between our ancestors’ and contemporary cultures. The “discovery” of isolated human groups in the remotest parts of the world by adventurers, journalists, and researchers in the past three hundred years encourages tentative inferences to be drawn about the social life of early humans, especially when the comparisons can match fairly well the archeological records of earlier peoples.

The overall picture painted of preliterate Homo sapiens is one of inventive adaptive strategies largely governed by environmental conditions. There was very slow population growth, with gradual migration and eventually much diversity in practices and beliefs. People spent their time in small groups foraging and hunting, with a minimal division of tasks that was primarily along gender and age lines. We know little about the spiritual beliefs they held but infer that these emerged from their efforts to eke out a living, reproduce their own kind, and define themselves within the natural and celestial worlds.

World Population Growth

It is difficult not to be startled at the most basic facts about human population growth. The number of people living on the planet was about one million (the population of a small city) in 10,000 BCE and had probably been about that number for millennia. Ten thousand years later, after the rise of the great kingdoms in what is now Iran and Egypt, the world’s population had grown to 200–300 million people, about the number of people now living in Japan. In the next centuries, the world’s population continued to grow, and it doubled by 1000 CE. It doubled again by the time the United States Constitution was ratified. By 1800, the total number of people living on earth reached one thousand million, i.e., a billion people.

It took another 130 years for the world’s population to reach two billion. That was in 1930, about the time Iris Summers was in high school. In her
lifetime, the world’s population nearly tripled.\textsuperscript{12} It grew to three billion in 1960, four billion in 1975, and five billion in 1989. It was six billion in 2000, will be seven billion people in 2012, and more than eight billion by 2030. The world’s population grew rapidly first in Europe, North America, and Japan. Since 1950, growth has been much faster in the rest of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, posing an enormous challenge to the economies and environments in those regions.\textsuperscript{13} Fortunately, global population is expected to stabilize by 2050. Population and its dynamics, including the factors influencing population growth and the consequences of this growth, are central to understanding the history of human societies.

Urbanization

The growth of cities challenged public order and safety, health and sanitation, and human adaptability, but once the process of urbanization began, it continued unabated. In 1500 CE there were only twenty-four places with a population of at least 100,000 people; four were in China and none were in Europe. In 1800, three of the world’s ten largest cities were in China (Beijing was the largest, with 1.1 million people) and three were in Japan. This was dramatically different in 1900. By then, 13 percent of the world’s population was urban, largely as a consequence of industrialization. The world’s largest cities were London with 6.5 million people, New York City with 4.2 million, and Paris with 3.3 million. They were followed by Berlin, Chicago, Vienna, Tokyo, St. Petersburg (Russia), Manchester (England), and Philadelphia. In the United States, 30 percent of the population was urban in 1900, up from 10 percent in 1860.

In the past sixty years, nearly all population growth worldwide has taken place in cities, due both to natural increases and rural-to-urban migration. Worldwide, three out of ten people were living in urban areas in 1950. Fifty-five years later, five out of ten were living in urban areas.\textsuperscript{14} More than three-quarters of the people in wealthier industrialized nations now live in cities,

\textsuperscript{12}Wes Jackson (2010, 7) observes that no one living before 1930 “lived during a doubling of the human population.”

\textsuperscript{13}Alene Gelbard and her colleagues (1999) provided a clear and fascinating overview, as part of an invaluable series of the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D.C.

\textsuperscript{14}An urban area has no agreed-upon definition, but the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition is similar to most: an area with 50,000 people or more.
and by 2030 this will be true in poorer countries as well. Only in recent
times has this dramatically new urban way of life become the norm for bil-
lions of people across the globe.

New Forms of Production and
the Development of Capitalism

Why has the human population grown at such a rapidly increasing pace? The answer probably lies with food. After the last Ice Age, many human
groups began to cultivate their environment rather than only foraging and
hunting. Horticulture, or the application of basic farming techniques, pro-
vided a more predictable food supply and an opportunity for at least a
partially sedentary life. Animals were domesticated, and seeds were selec-
tively culled from plants that best met the needs of people. Living a portion
or all of the year in one place, people honed the skills—particularly pottery
and metallurgy—to create goods for settled living.

Over the next several thousands of years, careful seed selection and breed-
ing of animals made agriculture more productive. The increased food supply
not only supported more people but made possible and necessary many new
social forms. A surplus of food meant that not everyone needed to produce
food. A very small portion of the people could specialize in religious prac-
tices, metal, wood and pottery crafts, and soldiering. It opened up opportu-
nities for some to accumulate the small surplus and use it as a source of
power toward others. Statecraft, writing, long-distance commerce, and the
arts of war were developed. They ushered in a radically different way of liv-
ing in those areas of the world where population growth was most rapid.15

First in the fertile valleys of present-day Iran and then in areas surround-
ing the Mediterranean Sea, empires of conquest and colonization grew,
spreading languages, belief systems, technology, and forms of governance of
the dominant groups. Trade and commerce as well as paths of conquest
brought into contact diverse cultures and social formations that borrowed
from one another, altering long-held ways of seeing, believing, and doing.

Contrary to what you may have learned in grade school, the end of the
Roman Empire around 400 CE did not usher in a Dark Ages lasting several
hundred years. A vibrant and immensely creative world outside the Euro-
pean continent—in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and in Central and South
America—reflected human ingenuity, new needs, and the will to power.

15Gerhard Lenski’s *Power and Privilege* (1986) is a fascinating examination of the
process of accumulation and inequality, as are sections of Jared Diamond’s *Guns,
Empires and dynasties emerged, new technologies were cultivated, literature and philosophy flourished, handcrafts and architecture gave a distinctive local look to material culture, and new ways of making war continued apace. Life in what is now Europe changed as well. Most people were farmers, subsisting on the work of their families and living in a local world only occasionally breached by a traveler, a government official, or a religious pilgrim. These were enough to alter in small ways the pattern of living and the sense of possibilities for another way, and little by little social life changed.

**Plunder, Mercantile, and Industrial Capitalism.** Most social historians designate the fifteenth century as the point when social change speeded up and modern times began. This was due to two “master processes . . . [i.e.] the development of capitalism and the formation of powerful, connected national states” (Tilly 1984: 15). Prior to the fifteenth century, those with enough power to coerce others had relied on tribute (taxes) to support themselves, pay for building projects, and fund military engagements. The empires of the Moguls, the Romans, the Muslims, the Ottomans, and others did little to alter the way of life of those under their control. Their design was to extract a portion of the surplus created by their subjects through a network of governors and tax officials exercising “tributary power” (Wolf 1982: 85). By propagating myths and belief systems that expressed a claim to supernatural or superior status, backed up by the ability to coerce through violence, empires became rich and powerful. Only later would states seek to transform economies in new ways that allowed them to grow, amass wealth, and engage in even greater imperial adventures.

One of the social sciences’ gifted early practitioners, Max Weber (1864–1918), examined early capitalism as practiced wherever “the possibilities of exchange, money economy, and money financing have been present,” including the Chinese and Roman empires (Weber 1964: 279). Of greater interest to him, however, was the first modern version of mercantile capitalism, initially practiced in parts of Europe around 1500 and characterized by rational behavior in finance, ownership, trading, and marketing. It organized production for profit.

Going beyond simply taking possession of what others created, mercantile capitalism increased the value of goods (wealth) by relocating them closer to markets. The Silk Road across Asia and its tributaries had for centuries connected sources and markets for merchants in Asia and Europe. By the fifteenth century, many other trade routes had developed and became the major focus of a burgeoning capacity to create wealth. Global trade and

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16Another early way of extracting wealth included, in Weber’s (1964: 280) phrase, “political capitalism” where “political events and processes [including the explicit use of violence and state power] . . . open up opportunities for profit.”
mercantile capitalism continued to develop as sources of wealth extraction well into the eighteenth century.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish mercantile capitalism from plunder capitalism, especially when those who resisted trading with European merchants and states were met with armed violence. The British East India Trading Company (as well as the French, Portuguese, Swedish, and Danish East India companies), in the process of amassing fortunes, killed or subjugated indigenous people who tried to maintain their sovereignty and way of life against the traders’ encroachments. As will be seen in Chapter 7, at first trading companies had their own armed mercenaries, but they were increasingly aided by their respective governments, and in time many became state corporations.

Among the most important mercantile systems was the triangle trade between England, Africa, and the New World. The death of slaves from the brutal conditions of labor on sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean and South America required the continual importation of new slaves from West Africa. Ships loaded with cloth, hand tools, and weapons were sent from England to trade for slaves. Human beings, captured and sold into slavery, were deposited in the New World where they became plantation labor. The ships returned to England with sugar that sold for a high price. Much of the sugar was made into gin and consumed by the growing, impoverished urban poor whose families had been small farmers.

The rural areas of England became the sites of production that funded a growing class of merchants and traders. They, in turn, became the backbone of a more flexible, economically aggressive political system: representative democracy. Serfdom became less common in the twelfth century and “by the fifteenth, serfdom was almost universally abolished in the west” (Anderson 1971: 143).17 Rural families were contractually obligated but legally independent. By 1700, the declining rural standard of living, in part because of the consolidation of land and creation of sheep pastures that accompanied the rise of the woolen industry, made rural families eager for any source of income. Some peasants turned their homes into workshops (hence the term “cottage industry”) that processed and spun thread and wove woolen cloth under contracts with merchants. The capital accumulation from this arrangement in time allowed merchants to shift the work to new urban factories. These could be powered by water and, with increasing technological sophistication, steam, reducing further the need for human labor.18 Thousands of the redundant poor were shipped to England’s new colonies, including Australia.

17Serfdom did not officially end in England until Queen Elizabeth’s proclamation in 1574 and in France until 1781.

18Eric Wolf’s Europe and the People Without History (1982) tells this story well.
Industrial capitalism and the first factories began the process of proletarianization, relocating peoples’ place of work to large-scale production sites where, for a specified amount of labor time, they received a wage. Many factories retained the shop-oriented work teams headed by master craftsmen who did their own hiring, owned their tools, and possessed the knowledge of production. By the late nineteenth century and the advent of assembly line production, this, too, was changing. Today, most people who make things or provide a service accept the arrangements of workplace hierarchy and control and would be offended to be called proletarians rather than employees and middle-class consumers.

Eric Wolf (1982: 267) sums up the transformations in capitalism, culminating in an industrial revolution, by emphasizing not only the accumulation of capital but technology as the critical factor driving social change. “Technology and labor power were subjected to the calculus of creating surplus value. The result was to speed up the pace of technological change.”

To this could be added the need for the state to become more responsive to a significant portion of new and would-be elites and for the use of state power to help corporations acquire and control resources and markets around the world.

The problem of funds to run the state and pursue its ambitions required an ever-growing economy. This gave an advantage to mercantile capitalists who needed the state’s legal and military protection in order to pursue global trade. When industrial capitalism began to create a wealthy class of private owners, legal protections in the form of corporate laws, agreements on levels of taxation, and the state’s provision of protection against worker unrest and foreign confiscation were brokered that benefited economic elites in exchange for keeping the state well funded (Tilly 1992: 195–197).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, nearly all of the world’s people encountered colonial incursions, first by European nations and followed by those of the United States, Japan, and China. Their ability to do this rested heavily on superior technologies, especially technologies of war. Under colonial rule, regions of the world were transformed into satellites of the colonial powers in order to provide raw materials and, in some cases, finished goods that were the exclusive property of the colonial power.19 By 1886, Europe’s Berlin Conference had divided the entire African continent into colonial holdings, divisions that became de facto national borders in the two decades of independence movements following the Second World War.

19The exception was Latin America, whose nations were formed in the nineteenth century but remained closely tied to one or another European nation and functioned much as colonies did elsewhere.
Dominance of the National State

Charles Tilly’s (1984) second “master process” is the growth of national states as the dominant form of political organization. Empires that preceded nations were largely content to claim large areas of land encompassing a variety of peoples speaking different languages, practicing different religions, and involved in various ways of farming, animal husbandry, and fishing. The empire’s interest was in the physical security for its capital and major cities, uncontested control of trade in its domain, and the extraction of taxes from its subjects.

The national state—unlike empires—was much more active in remaking the life of the people over which it held control. Because it was deeply involved in the expensive activity of making war, the national state had to solve several economic and political problems. It could purchase an army, but this became prohibitively expensive. It could conscript an army, but resistance would in time erode the legitimacy of the state. A better solution was to emphasize a common national identity through the adoption of a single language and support for a state religion. Creating a national, “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s (1983) phrase, of personal attachments and social unity allowed the state to enlist loyalty and patriotism of its subjects in making war. Even this approach, however, was not without costs.

A bargain had to be struck with the citizens of the national state that gave them at least the sense of justice and equality of rights as well as a voice in the country’s affairs, i.e., political democracy. Subject people were in turn expected to respect the laws, pay taxes, and help fight the wars of the national state. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ushered in an expansion of social democracy by the national state that included a broader agenda of social welfare and improvements in peoples’ quality of life. This expansion of the state was loudly debated throughout the twentieth century and remains among the most contentious divides in the ideologies of democratic nations today.

One of the ways to influence the state’s agenda was the mass social movement and the occasional general strike. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the movements to abolish slavery, win legal equality for women, provide material protection for the nation’s most vulnerable citizens—beginning with widows and children (Skocpol 1992)—establish workers’ unions that owners were legally obligated to recognize, remove obstacles to full citizen participation without regard to race, and the myriad social movements following in the wake of the modern civil rights movement became a major force for social change in the twentieth century.
The power of scientific research and the technological solutions it provided contributed greatly to the economic foundation of industrial capitalism and the capabilities of the national state. Science, discovery, and technology were supported by growing affluence of an emerging middle class. The nineteenth-century state’s provision of general public education and specialized education in institutions of higher learning created a better-educated populace for a rapidly growing economy. Most importantly, scientific progress led to a dramatic shift in how the world was viewed, the capabilities of human beings to affect their environment, and the social relations and obligations among people. From these shifts grew the modern social sciences and efforts to understand and influence the process of social change.

Iris Summers’ Time and Place in Global Context

A commonplace observation is that the nineteenth century was the European century, and the twentieth century was the American century. Some suggest that the twenty-first century may belong to another nation or continent, e.g., China or Asia. Such statements are simplifications if the intention is to imply that whatever happened of significance happened in only one part of the world. More often the implication is that power—economic, political, and cultural—is concentrated in one part of the world and then shifts elsewhere. Europeans would be hard pressed to accede the twentieth century to the United States, and the historical record bears them out. By the same token, Latin America, South and East Asia, Russia, and Africa were hardly standing still the past two hundred years. There was plenty of power and influence being exerted throughout the world in pursuit of territory, economic advantage, natural resources, security, and the intention to dominate, exploit, and change.

Many of the major forces of global social transformation in your life have their origin or were significantly developed in the centuries before you were born. Global trade intensified in the nineteenth century and was the source of several wars between alliances of European nations. Industrialization emerged first in England early in the nineteenth century and soon took hold throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada. This shaped the lives of much of the population, in the kind of work people did, where they lived, family life, and the kinds of social inequalities that justified privilege and poverty. Nineteenth-century colonization and client states were central to both economic expansion throughout Europe and the transformation of nonindustrial societies. The consolidation of territory and nation building,
along with the creation of coercive judicial and military institutions, gave industrialized nations unrivaled authority. The corporate form allowed private companies, backed by state power, to form armies that forced others to participate in European economies. Invention, the diffusion of technology, and the impetus to engineer new possibilities for commerce and war accelerated change in material, political, economic, and cultural life worldwide.

More than a hundred years later many of these same forces are driving social change. The concentration of economic power and capital in multinational corporations and the global pursuit of earth resources, foodstuffs, a pliable workforce, and eager consumers now go by the name of economic globalization. Global military expenditures are at an all-time high, despite the decline in the Cold War great-power rivalry between the United States and now-defunct Soviet Union, and nuclear weapons remain available to obliterate much of the earth. The causes of human rights and social justice, as well as threats to resources and economic livelihoods, mobilize tens of thousands of people who increasingly rely on Internet-based social networks and cell phone communication to share their grievances, develop a compelling ideology, coordinate protest marches and public displays, and challenge corporate and state authority.

Some people fear that international organizations and regional coordination will subvert national sovereignty. To date, this has not happened. The national state remains the most significant political actor on the world stage. National self-interest more often than not dominates international conferences and the workings of international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union.

The capability of information to influence social change, especially amid a social movement for political change, is nothing new, whether the information is rumor or fact. What is new is the speed and immediacy of digital information, including images and sound, and the almost instantaneous dissemination of it around the world. For example, amid the Iranian protesters’ street marches in 2009, a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, was shot and killed. Her death was captured by two cell phone users, one of whom sent the two-megabyte file to an Iranian exile living in the Netherlands. She then posted the video on Facebook, and it quickly proliferated on YouTube where it was picked up by CNN and broadcast worldwide (Stelter and Stone 2009).

Information technologies now link people globally in surprising and significant ways. They are another manifestation of globalization, akin to the spread of popular music, movies, celebrity news, fashion, and fads. These culture forms often enter traditional domains and provoke a challenge to values, aspirations, and relationships that may split generations, spark
political movements, or unlock opportunities for mass marketing. They provoke both resistance to social change and an insistence that social change be locally, rather than globally, controlled.

A More Crowded Continent, a More Crowded World

When Iris Summers was a baby, nearly a hundred years ago, the U.S. population was ninety-two million. It now stands at well over three hundred million. Global population has gone from 1.79 billion to 6.8 billion people. Thousands of small towns declined, disappeared, or were absorbed into expanding cities, while small cities became massive metropolises. Fewer babies and toddlers died, and people began living longer. They not only increased in number, but their consumption of natural resources, especially energy and water, went up dramatically.

Globally the same thing happened. Population growth came later in less-industrialized parts of the world and in regions that had been colonial holdings, such as the Philippines, the British Raj (what is now India, Pakistan, Burma, and Bangladesh), Kenya, and Algeria. Families of six children or more remained the norm up to the end of the twentieth century in many parts of the world. A steady rural-to-urban migration created massive population centers that often could not accommodate millions of people living there. Crowded cities became overcrowded, with vast slums, squatter communities, and shantytowns ringing the urban core. When birth rates began declining, however, they did so quickly.

Changes in population can have many consequences. For instance, a growing or declining population may affect the supply of labor relative to demand, shifting wages in favor of or to the detriment of wage earners. An influx of people from other nations may spark prejudice and nativist movements that lead to violence and repressive laws. Infanticide of young females and abortion of female fetuses, as happens today in India, China, and elsewhere, alters the sex ratio and may result in outmigration of young males and more men remaining bachelors. Population growth can create competition for land, especially when environmental degradation reduces the amount of good land for farming and grazing. This can lead to violence and occasionally genocidal practices as happened in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Darfur region of Sudan.

Each year 140 million people are born. This looks like a frightening number, but it was 173 million fifteen years ago, and the number of people dying annually, currently about 57 million, is increasing. As a consequence, global population growth is slowing. At today’s rates of declining growth, population could stabilize at less than nine billion people by 2050. According to the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization, because of growing economies
there will need to be a 70 percent increase in food production and a doubling of food availability in developing countries. The use of nonrenewable resources is not likely to decline. Nor will the pollution created by industry, the burning of fossil fuels, and especially the demand for water. Where the energy and water to produce this food will come from, and whether it will be done in a sustainable way, will pose the greatest challenges and dilemmas—and the most difficult choices—of the twenty-first century.

DO POPULATION DYNAMICS DRIVE SOCIAL CHANGE?

The significance of population changes—including migration—lies in the meanings people attach to these changes (Are they worrisome or welcome?) and their response. Is a change in population itself a driver of social change? Many demographers, i.e., people who study population trends and population geography, treat "population pressure" as a force influencing social change. Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*, and others who find global population growth alarming see it as cataclysmic in the not-too-distant future, somewhat akin to the well-known prediction of impending starvation made nearly two hundred years ago by the clergyman Thomas Malthus.²⁰

Malthus' prediction has not been realized, though massive famines have happened. China’s Great Leap Forward contributed to millions dying of starvation from 1958 to 1960. Recognizing how uncontrolled population growth would thwart improved standards of living, China’s one-child policy was instituted and has reduced what would have been the current population by at least two hundred million people. Globally, growth rates are dropping precipitously. In European countries, Russia, Japan, and the United States, the fertility rate is below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman. Annual world population growth is expected to decline from 1.3 percent to barely .3 percent by 2050 (U.N. 2010).

Is this social change, or is it a trend that seeks an explanation? Social scientists are keen to know what social changes are causing this dramatic reduction in fertility. There surely are many contributing

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²⁰Malthus urged “positive measures,” and particularly abstinence, on the part of the lower classes in order to delay the inevitable day that population would outstrip the food available to sustain the world’s population. He doubted this would actually happen, however, and a day would come when there was not enough food to support the population, resulting in mass famine.
factors, including increased availability of birth control, an improved standard of living, government policies penalizing large or favoring small families, and improvements in the literacy and status of women. Numbers of people per se, even when changing quickly, are facts to be explained by the forces that impel social change.

In the late 1800s, cities in the United States adopted programs and regulations that led to improved housing and reduced overcrowding. As discussed in Chapter 8, public health and sanitation measures included landfills for trash and chlorination of drinking water to reduce waterborne diseases like cholera. State and local health departments adopted vaccination programs, beginning with smallpox in 1900, that greatly reduced communicable diseases. By midcentury, childhood vaccinations were common. The most deadly diseases in 1900 were pneumonia and tuberculosis; these have been treated with antibiotics since the 1940s, dramatically reducing their death toll.

In 1918, half a million Americans died in a worldwide flu pandemic. With the exception of HIV/AIDS, there has been nothing comparable since. Americans today can expect to live thirty years longer than in 1900 when life expectancy at birth was 47.3 years. Children under the age of five accounted for 30 percent of all deaths in 1900, and now they are less than 2 percent. These are features of change to be explained. What drove these changes?

The forces impelling demographic changes like these include scientific discoveries, government efforts, and the development of the pharmaceutical industry. It is more complex than this, but the study of social change in most cases treats population dynamics as part of the social change process and a subject to be explained rather than a driver of social change.

The More Things Change . . .

In her Shifts in the Social Contract (1996), Beth Rubin writes that social change is happening very rapidly, especially since the mid-twentieth century. In a popular textbook that emphasizes the evolutionary perspective, Patrick Nolan and Gerhard Lenski conclude that “rapid social and cultural change has been the exception rather than the rule until recently” (Nolan and Lenski 2009: 52, italics added).
Social change proceeds neither at a constant speed nor in a straight line. Social change has been variously described as being linear, cyclic, and like a pendulum. One of the more surprising features in twentieth-century social history, revealed in the life of Iris Summers, is the return by the end of the century to many of the features of one hundred years earlier. Certainly much has changed, as her life story reveals, but there is also a pendulum swing that makes some aspects of her early life more similar to that of young people today than young people at midcentury.

When Iris and Frank Summers married, and again today, the average age of marriage is several years later than in the 1950s. A hundred years ago as well as today, more people are living in multigenerational households, with adult children residing with their parents, even after becoming parents themselves, than was the case at midcentury. There is considerable personal uncertainty about financial security, and the ethos of material accumulation and consumption is tempered by the ideas of conservation and sustainability. In Iris Summers’ experience, this came from growing up with less, while today it stems from economic uncertainty and a concern for the well-being of the environment, the earth that future generations will inherit.

The most important swing of the pendulum in the United States—back and forth over the century—was the gap between rich and poor. It was wide at the start of the century and remained wide into the Great Depression. The industrial buildup for World War II, postwar economic prosperity, government taxation policies, strong labor unions, and a rising minimum wage “lifted all boats” over the next decades, expanding the middle class and narrowing the gap between rich and poor.

After 1970, however, that trend began to shift. An economic slowdown in the 1970s was followed by minor recessions in each succeeding decade and the Great Recession of 2007–2010. Changes in the federal tax code favored the wealthy and shifted federal revenue away from unearned income. The declining strength of labor unions, a stagnant

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21Household income increased between 1976 and 2006 for most people because of the increased number of household earners (especially wives entering the labor force and adult children living at home), despite the nearly stagnant average for wages. In this thirty-year period, the poorest fifth of all households had an 11 percent increase in household income; the next fifth had an 18 percent increase; the third fifth had a 21 percent increase, and the forth quintile had a 32 percent increase. The top 20 percent of households saw their income rise by 55 percent. Households at the very top, the top 1 percent with 2006 incomes averaging $1.2 million, had a 256 percent increase in income between 1976 and 2006 (Hacker and Pierson 2010: 23).
minimum wage, and global competition that induced manufacturers to close shop in the United States and set up production overseas all increased the division between rich and poor. Today, income and wealth inequality in the United States is greater than in any other industrialized country and is greater than it has been since the 1920s when Iris Summers was a girl.

Claude Fischer and Michael Hout’s *Century of Difference* (2006) concludes that education plays the most crucial role in influencing people’s life chances today. This contrasts to the huge influence on life chances of nationality and immigrant status in 1900. Their findings parallel the life of Iris Summers. Differences between rural and urban life narrowed throughout the twentieth century, largely because fewer people were living and working in the kind of rural isolation of their great grandparents. Roads and highways, automobiles, telephones, radio and television, and the Internet came to link virtually everyone.

The children of farmers, many of whom rented their land at the turn of the century, became factory and craft workers, and their children became service employees. Job opportunities became less a matter of where a person came from (their nationality or ethnicity) and more a matter of what they learned. Despite this change, overall chances of moving up (and down) in the social hierarchy or class structure changed little. They are about what they were a century ago.

**Drivers of Social Change**

The story of Iris Summers’ life and times highlights the things that most strongly affect social change. These are the topics of Chapters 4 through 8. Robert Merton, a major twentieth-century sociologist, called these “social mechanisms,” i.e., “social processes having designated consequences” (Merton 1968: 43–44). They can also be thought of as drivers of social change or major forces to which social change can be attributed.

The five drivers or mechanisms are often themselves the outcome of changing circumstances, and so it is a mistake to imagine that social life is unchanging until one of these mechanisms kicks in. Equally erroneous is to think that they act independently, that social change is the result of one or the other of the mechanisms. They often work in tandem or sequentially. Studying them in each chapter is only a means to thinking about and understanding the way each influences the speed, direction, and scope of social change. Understanding them helps unscramble situations of social change that might otherwise seem totally inexplicable.
Chapters 2 and 3 address two questions prior to studying the mechanisms or drivers of social change: How do we recognize social change? How do we understand social change? In a more formal presentation, these would be chapters on methods and theory, two staples of social science that are the foundation of its accomplishments. Entire careers of academic professionals are devoted to one or another of these topics, but most students new to the study of social change would rather skip them. That would be a mistake. It doesn’t take long to recognize how befuddled and frustrating inquiry becomes without some guidance in working through a maze of information and ideas. Everyone needs what Charles Hampden-Turner (1970) calls the toolbox of research methods and theory. These chapters provide a few basic tools.

Chapter 4 discusses social change due to new knowledge and ways of applying knowledge to the solution of problems. This is the general concept of technology and includes science, discovery, invention, and new applications of existing techniques. Much social change associated with technology occurs through processes of diffusion from the point of origin, adoption, and creative adaptations in order to solve problems, to say nothing of the problems new technologies create. Technology is nothing new, but for the past half millennium it has proliferated and proved to be a very powerful and transformative force.

Chapter 5 explores the ways that people challenge authority and mobilize for social change. Social movements grow out of grievances that impel people to join together in diagnosing a problem and proposing a solution toward which the social movement devotes resources. One of the most fascinating aspects of social movements is the framing process, i.e., putting forth a perspective that recommends a course of action and motivates participant involvement. Why so many social movements focus on enlisting the state and, increasingly, on the abuses of corporations, is part of the story of twentieth-century social movements, from suffrage to unionization, civil rights, and the environmental movement.

Chapter 6 takes a sobering view of transformation through war and revolution. The third driver of social change is international war and other coercive conflicts carried out by nations, groups within nations, and stateless groups. Ethnic groupings and nationalist aspirations have been central to civil conflicts for much of the past century and promise to be prominent in the decades ahead. The chapter concentrates on the way societies and regions are changed in preparation for war, during wartime, and in the aftermath of war. Revolutionary wars are motivated by hopes for social change,
but even defensive wars that seek to hold back social change rarely succeed in maintaining the status quo.

This chapter incorporates much of what has been examined up to this point and what comes after. War’s conduct is highly contingent on the technologies of warfare. The pursuit of nationhood or ethnic autonomy usually begins as a social movement. And wars shift the field for economic actors, altering the competition and—in the case of the “resource wars” in Africa—are promulgated by individuals and corporations in pursuit of wealth. Diplomacy and international organizations provide mechanisms and frameworks for the prevention of war and the pursuit of peace that have altered modern warfare and hold out hope for the diminution of war as a driver of social change.

Chapter 7 looks at the making, selling, buying, and consuming of the things that pervade our lives. The fourth driver of social change is the actions of large corporations in pursuit of economic gain. This change is rarely planned, but its cumulative effect has transformed economies, cultures, personal identities, and the relationships of everyday life. It sometimes seems that the power to create goods and services, as well as our sense of what we need, rivals the power of nature. The work we do, the health of our communities, our sense of well-being, and avenues to realize our life’s dreams are tied to corporate decisions. The worldwide pursuit of resources and markets influences foreign policy and military actions that change the world order. The influence and power of global corporations is a story critical to any understanding of social change.

Chapter 8 examines social change through the use of common resources and collective power. The fifth driver of social change is the state, the repository of collective power. Whether authoritarian and acting in the interests of a few, or democratically working on behalf of the people while protecting the rights of the minority, what modern states seek to accomplish affects everyone. This chapter examines how this is done and why, by telling the stories of several state actions in the United States and then focusing on modern China’s efforts to become a major economic power.

Chapter 9 takes up what many students want when they originally venture into the topic of social change. It offers some ideas on how to make social change happen. This final chapter stresses the importance of awareness, engagement, leadership, and taking responsibility for one’s actions. Rather than trying to predict the future—a valiant but dubious effort—this chapter focuses on making the future.
Topics for Discussion and Activities for Further Study

Topics for Discussion

1. Iris Summers is not a person of color, not a male, an immigrant, lesbian, or a person with disabilities or special needs. How might her life story have been different had she been any of these? She lived only a few years in a city, never went to jail, and spent her adult life as a wife and mother. What does this leave out of the picture of social change in Iris Summers’ lifetime?

2. Has contemporary social change caused the world to get larger, or has it gotten smaller? More or less diverse? Examine both sides to these questions, especially the one that seems less obvious to you. What are the things that make the world larger, smaller, more diverse, and less diverse?

3. Charles Tilly’s two “master narratives” cover a lot of ground in describing 500 years of social change in Europe and the rest of the world influenced by Europe. What might be left out? There was a radical change in religious thought, from Luther to liberation theology. Could this be a third master narrative?

4. Some students are from rural areas and some from urban areas. Because the shift from rural to urban was so critical in contemporary social change, explore the differences—some of which are described in this chapter—and their significance. Do you think the rural/urban divide is as important or obvious as it once was?

5. As a thought experiment, imagine a tremendous decline in global population. Would social change go backward, returning to bygone days? What would be the main challenges of a smaller population in a world that is trying to accommodate nearly seven billion people today? Or is it?

Activities for Further Study

1. Take a few minutes and read a good newspaper. Make a list of the social changes described and discussed in one day’s reporting. What data are cited? Why are these changes newsworthy?

2. Collect words, especially old (archaic) words that tell you about social change. Most obvious are words for technology and equipment. Who talks about typewriters or scythes these days? What about food? With the typical family eating 40 percent of their meals outside their home, has the language of cooking and meals changed? How about warfare? What do “interdiction” and “counterinsurgency” say about war in the twenty-first century? What social changes are reflected in the words you collect?
3. Have a conversation with someone in your family, a close friend, or someone you’re comfortable talking to who is more than sixty years old. Ask him or her to describe the three or four most important social changes in his or her lifetime. Discuss these with him or her: Why are they important? What were their causes? and How have they affected the person you are talking to? Present this to the class.

4. Why and how would anyone resist social change? Think of something that appears to be changing in the world around you that you might resist. Rather than just opting out or saying no, think about the source of this change and how you (and others) might oppose it or change its course. What concrete steps could you take? Who might join you? What would be your alternative course?

5. Go to a library that has a collection of popular magazines going back at least fifty, and preferably seventy-five, years or more. Read enough in them to imagine yourself actually living in the months the magazines were published. How would you be different? What thoughts would you not have? What would you not be doing? How would your view of life and the future be different from what they are now?