



THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

According to this theory social change occurs in a straight line like the flight of the bird Society incessantly proceeds towards definite aims. These aims of social progress are predetermined. Nature, fate or God has already determined them. Though the process of change may sometimes appear to waver but society always proceeds towards them. Historical accidents are helpful in this progress. Social change theory of Karl Marx is a Unilinear deterministic theory. Contemporary thinkers do not accept determinism or Unilinear movement. The following arguments have been forwarded in this connection

INTRODUCTION

In sociology important theories of social change have been classified into three categories :

1. Unilinear Theories or Deterministic Theories.
2. Cyclic Theories
3. Evolutionary Theories
4. Functionalist Theories
5. Conflict Theories

1. Theory of Unilinear Change or Deterministic Theories :

According to this theory social change occurs in a straight line like the flight of the bird Society incessantly proceeds towards definite aims. These aims of social progress are predetermined. Nature, fate or God has already determined them. Though the process of change may sometimes appear to waver but society always proceeds towards them. Historical accidents are helpful in this progress. Social change theory of Karl Marx is a Unilinear

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deterministic theory. Contemporary thinkers do not accept determinism or Unilinear movement. The following arguments have been forwarded in this connection:

(i) Cosmic. This theory tries to explain social change on cosmic level Therefore, though this may appear to be philosophically feasible, it cannot explain change in human society.

(ii) Oversimple. This theory suffers from the defect of oversimplification. In fact social changes is a complex process which cannot be explained by some pre-determined courses. It is difficult to fix the objectives of social change.

(iii) Unscientific. There is no scientific basis to prove this theory.

(iv) Pre-deterministic. This theory assumes objectives of social change to be pre-determined though these may not be so. Even if the society is proceeding towards some fixed objectives it is not possible to determine these objectives since this will require knowledge of the outline of future development of society. It is true that future may be predicted on the basis of past but neither does the human history exhibit some definite aims nor is it logical to accepts some definite and fixed objectives of social evolution.

2. Evolutionary Theories :

After Charles Darwin presented his theory of evolution, thinkers tried to trace the principle of evolution in every field of life, viz. philosophy, literature, religion, art, politics and economics. The evolution. however, may not be linear, it may be sprial, creative and emergent. Thus, white Auguste Comte, the father of modern sociology, traced linear evolution, Lloyd Morgan presented emergent theory and Karl Marx traced dialectical process. Herbert Spencer advanced biological theory of evolution.

3. Cyclic Theories :

According to these theories, as is clear by their nomenclature, social change is cyclical in nature. Examples of cyclic theories have been presented by Oswald Spengler, A. J. Toynbee, Vilfredo Pareto and P. A. Sorokin among others. According to cyclic theories social change involves repetition. Philosophers and thinkers since ancient times admitted cycles of creation and destruction. According to this theory social change proceeds like the pendulum of a clock in which various stages return again and again. Many ancient and modern thinkers have supported their theory.

According to Spengler just as in the physical world different seasons come after one another, similary cultures pass through spring, summer, autumn and winter season one after another.



According to A. J. Toynbee, the histories of great cultures show that they have passed through definite stages of rise and fall. Thus, one may find some definite pattern in social change. Great culture is born in response to some challenge. Gradually this challenge, if not successfully answered, becomes a crisis and the great culture declines. Thus, there is a predetermined rhythm in the rise and fall of culture.

Cyclic theory of social change perceives a sequence in the change in nature and society. Just as human being passes through different stages in life similarly society and culture pass through several stages. Cyclic change influences even the fields of politics and art etc. For example, in the field of art there is change from traditionalism to romanticism and again from romanticism to traditionalism. In the field of philosophy Hegel has pointed out definite stages of transition. Human history passes from thesis to antithesis and then to synthesis in every field of human achievement. The thesis again gives birth to a new thesis and the process continues. These stages may be seen not only in thought but even in literature, art and other fields of culture.

Some truth may be seen in cyclic changes in these fields but there is no dearth of exception. Cyclic change is however, but one aspect of change every-where. In other aspects there is no repetition. In the view of Pareto history repeats itself is true but it is as much true that it does not repeat itself. In fact, in the cases of repetition one may observe even differences. Some historical incidents resemble the earlier ones but others are totally new. So many factors are active in different fields of life. Here a question arises that if there is no definite pattern in history how are predictions possible? The fact is that all predictions are mere probabilities. No historian can claim absolute certainty for his predictions. Human intellect is very limited. Therefore, whatever sequence we may discover in some fields there is no warrant to claim certainty. The dispassionate observer should always keep his eyes upon the facts, only then alone his assertion will be reliable. The scientist, while predicting, must be flexible and modest. Hence, in the final analysis cyclic theory is one-sided and merely probable.

4. Functionalist Theories :

Functionalist theories explain change in terms of function. This class includes the sociological theories which have been propounded about the constituents of society on the basis of the function of its units. Examples of such theories are those propounded by Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Malinowsky, Radcliffe Brown and above all Talcott Parsons. Contemporary followers of this group emphasise the interrelationship of social structure and function. Of these, the most notable are Robert K. Merton and Talcott Parsons.

5. Conflict Theories :



Conflict theories explain change in terms of conflict of individuals, groups, classes and cultures. Examples of conflict theories may be found in the views of Herbert Spencer, G.E. Sumner, Ratzenhofer, Small and Oppenheimer. The most famous theory is that of Karl Marx.

Evolutionary Theories :

Auguste Comte is regarded to be the father of sociology. He organised and classified the social thought prevailing before his times. Comte gave birth not only to a specific methodology of studying knowledge but also analysed the evolution of human thinking and its various stages. The principle evolved by Comte in the study of human thinking presumes gradual evolution and development in human thinking and is known as the law of three stages of thinking. It is known as the law of three stages because, according to it, human thought has undergone three separate stages in its evolution and development. The main importance of this principle is that it provides the basis of sociological thinking.

According to Auguste Comte, human thinking has passed through the following three stages. There has been an evolution in the human thinking so that each succeeding stage is superior to and more evolved than the preceding stage :

1. Theological or Fictitious stage,
2. Metaphysical or Abstract stage,
3. Scientific or Positive stage.

August Comte has explained his classification of human thinking into various stages in the following words: “.....that each of our leading conceptions, each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical conditions, the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive.” In the following, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive.” In the following pages we shall discuss these stages briefly.

1. Theological or Fictitious Stage :

The first or primary stage of human thinking is theological or fictitious. This type of thinking is found among the primitive races and sometimes the thinking of children is also at this level. At this level of thinking there is marked lack of logical and orderly thinking. The primitive men and children do not have the scientific outlook. Therefore, theological thinking is characterized by non-scientific or unscientific outlook. The unusual and unintelligible events of nature tend man towards theological or fictitious interpretation of the events. Unable to discover the natural causes of the various happenings, the primitive man attributes



them to imaginary or divine forces. The explanation of natural events in non-natural, divine or imaginary conditions is known as theological or fictitious thinking. For example, if we explain and understand the excess or deficiency of rain due to godly wrath, such a causal explanation would be in terms of theological or fictitious explanation. The theological thinking implies belief in an other-world, where-in reside the divine forces which control the events in this world. Thus, it is clear that theological thinking implies a belief in divine and extra-terrestrial forces. Comte has classified the theological stage further into three-fold stages. These are : (1) Fetichism, (2) Polytheism and Monotheism.

(A) Fetichism : The first and primary stage in theological thinking is that of Fetichism. Fetichism is a belief that there is some living spirit in the non-living objects. This is also known as animism. As the very term animism signifies it means that the so-called inanimate objects are not dead and lifeless but are informed by a living spirit. The example of fetichistic thinking can be seen from the widespread belief among rural people in India that some deity resides in trees. They are, therefore, seen engaged in the worship of trees etc.

(B) Polytheism : With the gradual development in human thinking there occurred a change in the form of thinking. The move evolved and developed a form other than that of Fetichism known as Polytheism. At this stage man had classified gods as well as natural and human forces. Each natural or human force had a presiding deity. Each God had some definite functions and his scope and area of action was determined.

(C) Monotheism : The last and most developed form of theological thinking is seen manifested in monotheism. As the very term monotheism implies, at this level of human thinking a belief in one God had replaced the earlier belief in many gods. The monotheistic thinking symbolizes the victory of human intellect and reason over non-intellectual and irrational thinking. In monotheism it is believed that one God is Supreme and that He is responsible for the maintenance of order and system in the world.

2. Metaphysical or Abstract Stage :

The metaphysical or abstract thinking marks the second stage in the evolution of human thinking. According to Comte each successive stage is an improvement upon the earlier stage. With the gradual improvement in human thinking the human problems also become more complex and intricate. The theological thinking was not adequate to tackle these efficiently. The appearance of conflicting and opposite forces in the world presented problems which could not be successfully tackled by monotheism. It was difficult to believe that the same God was responsible for primordial creation as well as destruction. A personal and concrete God could not account for the simultaneous creation and annihilation. In order to resolve this intellectual puzzle or riddle, metaphysical thinking was invented. Under



metaphysical thinking, belief in an abstract transcendental entity or Absolute replaces the belief in personal concrete God. Under metaphysical thinking it is believed that an abstract power or force guides and determines the events in the world. Metaphysical thinking discards belief in concrete God.

3. Scientific or Positive Stage :

After theological and metaphysical thinking comes the next stage known as scientific or positive stage. All metaphysical knowledge is based upon speculation and is at best inferential knowledge. There are no direct means to confirm the metaphysical knowledge. In the last analysis it is a matter of belief or temperament. The modern temper of man is such that it cannot remain satisfied with mere guesswork; it craves positive knowledge which can be scientifically confirmed. The positive or scientific knowledge is based upon facts, and these facts are gathered by observation and experience. The observation and classification of facts are the beginning of scientific knowledge. From the facts we generalize and draw conclusions. These conclusions in turn are subjected to verification and once verified these become established laws, which can be relied upon in gathering and classifying the facts. The scientific thinking is thoroughly rational and in it there is no place for any belief or superstition.

Auguste Comte is of the opinion that all human thinking before reaching the stage of positivism must have passed through the two earlier stages of theological and metaphysical thinking. Even in scientific thinking some traces of earlier types are to be usually found.

Relation of Levels of Thinking to Social Organisation :

Where Comte has tried to prove that there are various levels in human thinking, he has also tried to show that each of these is linked with a particular social organisation. According to Comte social organisation in a particular society is correspondent to the stage of human thinking through which it happens to be passing. It happens to be passing. It is only with change in the level of human thinking that there occurs a change in the social organization. The types of social organizations obtaining at the various levels of human thinking are discussed briefly below :

1. Theological Stage and Social Organisation :

In the theological condition of human thinking, the social organization was of a particular type. The particularity of social organization at this stage was that the social laws, political laws etc. were accepted as absolutely valid and nobody questioned their validity. The theory of divine rights of king was accepted. The king was accepted to be the representative of God;



and, therefore, the laws made by him could not be wrong. Most societies in the theological stage were ruled by monarchs and in some societies king was considered to be a God on earth. The discipline was quite rigorous in these societies. The primary reason for the rigorous and martial discipline was that the laws made by the king were considered to be divine and any violation of these was considered tantamount to disobedience of God's will. Therefore, no one easily dared to oppose and flaunt the laws of the society. Superstitions were rife in these societies.

2. Metaphysical Stage and Social Organisation :

Under metaphysical state of human thinking, social organization was of quite different type from the social organization under the theological stage. These societies were guided by some abstract principles. The political system also undergoes change and the power of the king becomes restricted. The constitutional system of government gets priority. The constitutional changes are gradual and there is a movement toward decentralisation of power leading ultimately to ushering in of democracy. Thus under metaphysical stage some power passes into the hands of people.

3. Scientific Stage and Social Organization :

In the scientific stage the social and political laws are determined in a definite and well defined form. In these Societies industry and technology predominates. The natural resources are harnessed for human good. The superstitions are mistrusted Reason is demanded in every matter and the fear of divine wrath no longer prevails.

In short we can say various therious of social change are found arouns us. And its basic arameters are also different. We need to understand each and every ersective in various context and situartion.

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