

Chapter 29: Evolution and Change in History

What we have said so far concerns one of the two important problems of history. The question so far dealt with was whether the nature of history is materialistic or not. Another important question is that of the evolution of history.

We know that social life is not confined to man alone. There are some other living beings also, which more or less lead some sort of social life based on mutual cooperation and division of labour and sharing of responsibilities under well organized laws and rules.

We all know that the honey-bee is one of such living beings. But there is one basic difference between the social existence of other living beings and that of man. The social existence of other living beings always remains fixed and static. No change or development in the system of their life or in the words of Morris Metterlink, in their culture – if that expression is correct ever takes place.

In contrast, the social life of man not only develops and changes, but it also gradually gathers speed and gains momentum. That is why the history of the social life of man has been divided from different angles into distinct periods distinguished from each other.

For example, from the view-point of the means of living, it has been divided into the periods of hunting, agriculture and industrial development. From the view-point of economic system it has been divided into the period of primitive communism, the period of slavery, the period of feudalism, the period of capitalism and the period of socialism. From political point of view it has been divided into the period of tribal rule, the period of despotism, the period of aristocracy, and the period of democracy. From the point of view of sex it has been divided into the period of matriarchy and the period of patriarchy. So on and so forth.

Why is this kind of development not found in the social life of other animals? Which basic factor is the cause of man's shifting from one social period to another? In other words, what is that which pushes life forward and is found in man and not found in animals? What is the mechanism of this progress?

In this connection the philosophers of history usually raise a question. They ask whether the social life of man has really made any progress over history, and if it has, by what criterion, we can judge it and be sure of it.

Some sociologists doubt that the changes which have taken place may really be called a progress or an evolution. Some other sociologists hold that the movement of history is circular. They claim that history moves from a point, and after passing several stages reaches the same point again, and then once more begins to move in the same fashion as previously.

For example, a stiff tribal system is set up by the nomads, possessing will and courage. The tribal government naturally leads to the establishment of an aristocracy. The dictatorial actions of the aristocratic government culminate in a general revolution and the establishment of a democracy. Some time later the chaos and confusion caused by too much freedom under a democratic government once again lead to despotism with a tribal spirit.

At present we do not propose to enter into the discussion of this point and leave it to some other occasion. As a basis of further study we assume that on the whole history has marched forward and made progress.

It may be pointed out that those who maintain that history is going forward admit that the forward movement of history does not mean that the future of all societies under all circumstances is better than their past, that societies always and without any interruption move forward, and that there is no chance of their ever declining and moving backwards.

There is no doubt that societies come to a halt, decline, retrogress, turn to the left or the right and finally fade out. Nevertheless on the whole they move forward.

The question, what the motivating force of history and the factor of the social development is, has been usually so described in the books of philosophy that the incorrectness of the description becomes clear after a little consideration of it. Usually the following views are expressed about this question:

I. The Racial Theory

According to this theory, certain races are mainly responsible for the advancement of history. It is supposed that some races have the capability of creating culture and civilization, whereas some others do not possess such talents. Some races can produce science, philosophy, ethics, art and technology. Whereas some others are mere consumers of these commodities, not the producers of them.

Hence, it is concluded that there should be a sort of division of labour among different races. The races which are fit for politics, education and the production of culture, art and technology should be exclusively responsible for human, fine and sublime activities. On the other hand the races which do not have such a capability should be excused from these activities and instead should be entrusted with

manual and semi-animal work which does not require high thinking and sublimity of taste. This was the consideration why Aristotle who held such views, regarded some races fit for owning slaves and other races unfit for that.

Some thinkers believe that only particular races are able to lead the course of history. For example, they say that northern races in this respect are superior to southern races. It were the northern races which pushed human culture forward. Count Gobino, the famous French philosopher, who was for three years French Ambassador to Iran about hundred years ago, supported this theory.

II. The Geographical Theory

According to this theory it is a particular sort natural environment that produces culture, education and industry. For example, the temperate regions produce moderate temperaments; and powerful brains. In the first part of the *Qanun*, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) has discussed at length the effects of the natural environment on the mental and temperamental personality of man.

According to this theory what pushes history forward is not the hereditary factor of race and blood. It is not that a particular race pushes history forward in every climate and every region and that another race wherever it may be living lacks that capacity. The difference in the capabilities of different races is the result of the difference in their environment. With the dispersion of races their capabilities also disperse. As such it is particular areas and regions which push history forward and cause new developments. The French sociologist of the 17th century Montesquieu in his celebrated book, *De Lesprit des lois* (the Spirit of the Law) advocates this theory.

III. Theory of Intellectual Giants

According to this theory all historical developments, whether scientific, political, economic, technical or moral, are produced by extraordinarily intelligent and ingenious persons. Man in this respect differs from all other living beings. Individual members of other species have biologically almost similar capabilities. At least there appears to be no appreciable difference.

In contrast, among the human beings as regards to their capabilities a great disparity is often observed. Exceptionally genius persons are found in every society. Whenever these geniuses possessing extraordinary intellect, taste, will or initiative appear in a society, they push it forward scientifically, technically, morally, politically or militarily.

According to this theory, most of the human beings lack initiative and creativity. They only follow and consume the ideas and the products of the industry of others.

In fact, more or less always, in every society there exists a minority which possesses a creative bent of mind. It has initiative, possesses original ideas, and goes ahead of others. It is this minority that pushes

history forward and brings it to a new stage. The well-known English philosopher Thomas Carlyle believed that history was shaped by outstanding individuals. In his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* he has made the following remarks about the Holy Prophet of Islam:

"The history of every nation is a manifestation of one or more than one outstanding personalities. More properly speaking, the history of every nation is a manifestation of the personality and the genius of one or more than one heroes. For instance, the history of Islam is a manifestation of the personality of the Holy Prophet; the history of modern France is a manifestation of the personality of Napoleon; and the Soviet history of the last sixty years is a manifestation of the personality of Lenin."

IV. The Economic Theory

According to this theory economy is the motivating force of history. All social and historical affairs of a nation whether they are cultural, political, military or social, are a reflection of the production methods and production relations of that society. It is a change in the economic basis of a society that transforms its structure and pushes it forward. The geniuses mentioned above are not more than a manifestation of the economic, political and social needs of society caused by a change in the implements of production. Karl Marx, the Marxists on the whole and sometimes even some non-Marxists support this theory. Perhaps it is the most popular theory of our time.

V. The Divine Theory

According to this theory, whatever appears on the earth, is a heavenly affair which comes down to the earth in accordance with the profound wisdom of Allah. All historical changes and developments are a manifestation of His judicious will and profound wisdom. Therefore it is Divine will that pushes history forward and brings about changes in it. History is a scenario of the Divine Will. Bishop Bossuet, a well known historian and tutor of Louis XV advocated this theory.

These are the theories which have been usually discussed in the books of philosophy of history in connection with the causes that move history.

From our point of view none of these theories represents the correct position and they all are the result of some sort of a confusion. We want to find out the causes that move history, but these theories are largely irrelevant to what we want. For instance the racial theory is nothing more than a sociological theory. It is relevant only when the question is whether different human races have or have not some hereditary capabilities and whether they all are or not intellectually of the same level. If they are of the same level, that means that all races equally take part in the movement of history or at least theoretically they can. If they are not of the same level, that means that some races alone are fit to take part in the process of pushing history forward. So far this theory has been formulated correctly, but it does not resolve the mystery of the philosophy of history. Suppose we admit that all historical developments are effected by a certain race. Still our problem remains unsolved, for we still do not know why human life or

the life of any particular human race develops, whereas animal life remains stationary. The question whether the factor of progress is one race or all races, does not unveil the secret of the movement of history.

The same is the case with the geographical theory. It is a useful theory and relates to an important sociological question as it shows that environments play an effective role in the mental, intellectual, temperamental and physical growth of man. Some environments keep man within or near the limits of an animal and others further his distance and distinction from animals. According to this theory, history moves among the men of certain regions and territories only. In other regions it is stationary and monotonous. But the main question still remains where it was. For example honey-bees and other gregarious animals lack historical movement even in the regions conducive to mental growth. Then what is the real cause of the difference between these two kinds of living beings, one kind of which remains stationary, whereas the other kind always moves from one stage to another?

The divine theory is still more inconsistent than these other theories. Is history alone a manifestation of the Divine Will? In fact the whole world from the beginning to the end including all causes and hindrances, is a manifestation of the Will of Allah.

The Divine Will bears the same relation to all causes of the world. As the developing and changing life of man is a manifestation of the Divine Will, similarly the stationary and monotonous life of the bees is also a manifestation of His Will. The real question is what that system is with which the Divine Will has endowed the life of man to make it developing while the life of other animals is stationary because it is devoid of that system.

The economic theory lacks technical aspect and has not been advanced as a principle. The economic theory of history, as it has been propounded, throws light on the nature of history only and shows that it is material and economic, and that all other affairs are tantamount only to forms or nonessential characteristics. Consequently, all affairs of society necessarily change. But all that is a question of 'if'. The real question still remains unanswered. Even if we admit that economy is the infrastructure of society and with its change the whole society undergoes a change, the question is why it is so.

What is that factor or factors which change the whole superstructure following a change in the infrastructure? Economy may be the infrastructure of society, but that does not necessarily mean that it is the motivating force of history also. Of course if the supporters of this theory instead of describing economy as the infrastructure of society, had described it as the motivating force of history, considered materiality of history to be enough for its dynamism, brought out the question of the inner contradiction of society and said that the real motivating force is the contradiction between the infrastructure and the superstructure of society or the contradiction between the two aspects of the infrastructure (implements of production and production relations), the theory would have been presented properly.

There is no doubt that the aim of the proponents of the above theory in its present form is to say that the

real cause of all movements of history is the inner contradiction between the implements of production and the production relations. But we are concerned with the correct presentation of the theory, not with what is in the minds of its proponents.

The theory of the intellectual giants, irrespective of the fact whether it is correct or incorrect, directly relates to the philosophy of history or the motivating factor of history.

As such so far we have got only two theories about the force which moves history. One of them being the theory of the giants, according to which history is created by the outstanding individuals. In fact, this theory claims that most members of society or almost all of them lack initiative, originality and power of leadership. They can bring about no change in society. But from time to time a very small minority with an extraordinary imaginative and creative capacity emerges in society. Its members take initiative, plan things, take decisions and pull the ordinary people behind them. Thus they bring about a change. These heroic personalities are the product of extraordinary events, both natural and hereditary, but not of the social conditions or the material needs of society.

The second theory is that of the contradiction between the infrastructure and the superstructure of society. This theory may properly be called the theory of the motivity of economy. We have already referred to it, and need not dwell on it again.

There is a third theory also and that is the theory of the inborn characteristics. Man's nature is such that he has certain inherent characteristics which make his life evolutionary.

One of these characteristics is his ability of gathering and preserving experiences. Whatever knowledge and information man acquires through his experience, he retains it in his mind and uses it as a basis for his further experiments.

Another characteristic of man is his capacity of learning through speech and writing. Through these mediums he can transmit his experience to others. The experience of one generation is preserved for the benefit of the subsequent generations by means of speech and writing and thus human experience continues to pile up. That is why the Qur'an has given special importance to the blessings of speech and pen. The Qur'an says: **"The Beneficent has made known the Qur'an. He has created man. He has taught him articulate utterance."** (Surah ar-Rahman, 55: 1-4) At another place it says: **"Read: In the name of your Lord Who created, -- created man from a clot. Read: And your Lord is the Most Bounteous, who taught by the pen."** (Surah al-Alaq, 96: 1-4)

The third characteristic of man is his being equipped with the power of reason and initiative. By means of this mysterious power he can originate things, for he is a manifestation of the creative power of Allah. His fourth characteristic is his inherent desire to do something original. In other words man is not only potentially creative, but he can actually create things whenever necessary. Not only that, but a creative tendency has been implanted in his nature.

Man's capability of remembering and preserving his experience, his capacity of communicating it to others and his inherent tendency to be creative combined together are a force that always pushes man forward. In other animals there exists neither a capacity of remembering their experience and communicating it to others nor originality and initiative, nor any strong desire of being creative. That is the reason why the animals are stationary and man marches forward. Now we shall scrutinize these theories.

The Role of Personality in History

Some people have asserted that history is a struggle between ingenuity and normal limits. The common and average people support the situation to which they have been accustomed while the geniuses want to replace the existing situation with a better one. Carlyle claims that history begins with the geniuses and the heroes. This theory is in fact based on two presumptions:

The first presumption is that society is devoid of nature and personality. The individuals composing society do not form a real compound. All individuals are independent of each other.

They act and react upon each other, but they do not form a compound having its own collective spirit, personality, nature and special laws. They all have their individual mentality and way of thinking. The individuals; bear the same relation to society as the trees to a forest. Social events are nothing but a total of individual events. As such society is mostly governed by the universal and general causes.

The second presumption is that individual human beings have been so created that they vastly differ from each other. Although generally speaking the human beings according to the terminology of the philosophers are rational animals, yet almost all of them lack originality and creativity. Most of them are the consumers of culture and civilization, not the producers of them. In this respect they differ from the animals only so far that the animals cannot even be the consumers of culture. The spirit of majority is that of imitation, unquestioning adoption and hero-worship.

But a very small minority of men consists of heroes, geniuses, independent thinkers of outstanding calibre, of those who have an original and creative spirit, and of those who possess a strong will. They are distinct from the majority. Had there been no scientific, philosophical, artistic, political, social, ethical and technical geniuses and heroes, humanity would not have moved a step forward and would have remained where it was in the beginning.

From our point of view both these presumptions are defective. As for the first presumption, we have, while discussing society, proved that society has its own personality, nature, laws and norms and all events take place in accordance with its established general traditions. These traditions in themselves are progressive and evolutionary. Therefore we must set aside this presumption and then see whether, in spite of the fact that society has its personality, nature and traditions, it is possible for the personality of the individual to play any role in the march of events. We will discuss this point later. As for the

second presumption, although it cannot be denied that the human beings have been so created that they differ from one another,

it is not correct to say that only heroes and geniuses have creative power and all others are the consumers of culture and civilization. In fact more or less all human beings have creative capacity, and as such all individuals or at least most of them can take part in productive and creative activities, though their share may be insignificant as compared to that of a genius.

Diametrically opposed to the theory that personalities create history, there is another theory which asserts that it is history that creates personalities. In other words, it is actually the existing social needs that create a personality.

Montesquieu has said: "Great men and important events are the signs and the results of the longer and greater events." Hegel said: "Great men do not give birth to history; but act as midwives." The great men are the symbols, not the agents. According to the thinking of those who like Durkheim believe that collective spirit is the basic thing, and that the individuals as such absolutely lack personality and they borrow their whole personality from society, the individuals including big personalities are nothing but a manifestation of the collective spirit of society. In the words of Mahmud Shabistari they are a screen of the window of collective spirit.

From the view-point of those who like Marx consider individual consciousness to be a manifestation of the collective material needs, the personalities are a mere manifestation of the material and economic needs of society.

1. See: E.H. Carr, What is History?; Will Durant, Studies in History, The Pleasures of Philosophy, pp. 291-312

2. Some animals can transmit to others what they have learnt, but only on the level of daily events, not on the level of any scientific experience. The Qur'an also hints at this fact when it says: "When they (Sulayman's army) arrived in the valley of ants, one ant said to the others, 'Enter your dwellings lest you be carelessly crushed by Sulayman and his army.'" (Surah an-Naml, 27:18)

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