

Society and Tradition

If society has real existence, it should naturally possess laws peculiar to it. If we accept the first theory about the nature of society (which we have already discussed) and reject the existence of society as a real entity, naturally we have to admit that society lacks laws which may govern it. And if we accept the second theory and believe in artificial and mechanical composition of society, then we would have to admit that society is governed by laws but that its laws are confined to a series of mechanical and causal relationships between its various parts, without the distinguishing features and particular characteristics of life and living organisms.

And if we accept the third point of view, we shall have to accept, firstly, that society itself has a comparatively more permanent existence independent of the existence of individuals although this collective life has no separate existence, and is distributed and dispersed among its individual members, and incarnates itself in their existence. It has discoverable laws and traditions more permanent and stable than those of the individuals, who are its components.

Secondly, we shall have to accept also that the components of society, which are human individuals, contrary to the mechanistic point of view, lose their independent identity—although in a relative fashion to produce an organically composite structure. But at the same time the relative independence of the individual is preserved because individual life, individual nature, and individual achievements are not dissolved totally in the collective existence.

According to this point of view, man actually lives with two separate existences, two souls, and two “selves.” On the one hand, there are the life, soul, and self of the human being, which are the products of the processes of his essential nature; on the other, there are the collective life, soul, and self which are the products of social life, and pervade the individual self. On this basis, biological laws, psychological laws, and sociological laws, together, govern human beings. But according to the fourth theory, only a single type of laws governs man, and these are the social laws alone.

Among the Muslim scholars `Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun of Tunisia was the first and the foremost Islamic thinker to discuss clearly and explicitly the laws governing the society in independence from the laws governing the individual. Consequently he asserted that the society itself had a special character,

individuality, and reality. In his famous introduction to history, he has discussed this theory in detail. Among the modern scholars and thinkers Montesquieu (the French philosopher of the eighteenth century A.D.) is the first to discuss the laws which control and govern human groups and societies. Raymond Aron says about Montesquieu.

His purpose was to make history intelligible. He sought to understand historical truth. But historical truth appeared to him in the form of an almost limitless diversity of morals, customs, ideas, laws, and institutions. His inquiry's point of departure was precisely this seemingly incoherent diversity. The goal of the inquiry should have been the replacement of this incoherent diversity by a conceptual order. One might say that Montesquieu, exactly like Max Weber, wanted to proceed from the meaningless fact to an intelligible order. This attitude is precisely the one peculiar to the sociologist. 1

It means that a sociologist has to reach beyond the apparently diverse social forms and phenomena, which seem to be alien to one another, to reveal the unity in diversity in order to prove that all the diverse manifestations refer to the one and the same reality. In the same way, all the similar social events and phenomena have their origin in a similar sequence of analogous causes. Here is a passage from the observations on the causes of the rise and fall of the Romans.

It is not fortune that rules the world. We can ask the Romans, who had a constant series of success when they followed a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of disasters when they followed another. There are general causes, whether moral or physicalwhich operate in every monarchy, to bring about its rise, its duration and its fall. All accidents are subject to these causes, and if the outcome of a single battle, i.e. a particular cause, was the ruin of a state, there was a general cause which decreed that that state was destined to perish through a single battle. In short, the main impulse carries all the particular accidents along with it. 2

The Holy Qur'an explains that nations and societies qua nations and societies (not just individuals living in societies) have common laws and principles that govern their rise and fall in accordance with certain historical process. The concept of a common fate and collective destiny implies the existence of certain definite laws governing the society. About the tribe of Bani Israel, the Qur'an says:

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي الْكِتَابِ لَتُفْسِدُنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَتَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا
كَبِيرًا فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ أُولَاهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ عِبَادًا لَنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا
خِلَالَ الدِّيَارِ وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَّفْعُولًا ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ الْكَرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَأَمْدَدْنَاكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ
وَبَنِينَ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ أَكْثَرَ نَفِيرًا إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا فَإِذَا
جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ لِيَسُوءُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَلِيَدْخُلُوا الْمَسْجِدَ كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ
وَلِيَتَّبِعُوا مَا عُلُوًّا تَبْتِيرًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يَرْحَمَكُمْ وَإِنْ عُدتُّمْ عُدْنَا وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ
لِلْكَافِرِينَ حَصِيرًا

And we decreed for the Children of Israel in the scriptures: You verily will work corruption in the earth twice, and you will become great tyrants. So when the time for the first of the two came We roused against you slaves of Ours of great might who ravaged [your] country, and it was a threat performed.' [After you had regretted your sins and became pious again] Then we gave once again your turn against them, and we aided you with wealth and children and made you more in soldiery.

[Saying] If ye do good, ye do good for your own souls, and if ye do evil, it is for them. (I.e. Our laws and customs are fixed and constant, it is by this covenant that people are bestowed with power, might, honour and constancy or subjected to humiliation and abjectness). So when the time for the second [of the judgements] came, because of your acts of tyranny and despotism, we aroused against you others [of our slaves] to ravage you, and to enter the temple even as they entered it the first time, and to lay waste all that they conquered with an utter wasting. It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you [if ye mend your ways], but if you repeat [the crime] we shall repeat [the punishment], and we have appointed hell a dungeon for the disbelievers.

(17:4-8)

The last sentence, i.e. ***“But if you repeat [the crime] we shall repeat [the punishment]”*** shows that the Qur’an is addressing all the people of the tribe and not an individual.

It also implies that all the societies are governed by a universal law.

Determinism or Freedom

One of the fundamental problems discussed by philosophers, particularly in the last century, is the problem of determinism and freedom of individual as against society, or, in other words, determinism and freedom of the individual spirit vis-à-vis the social spirit. If we accept the first theory regarding the nature of society, and consider social structure to be merely a hypostatized notion, and believe in the absolute independence of the individual, then there will be no place for the idea of social determinism.

Because, there will be no power or force except that of the individuals, and no social force that may rule over the individual. Hence, in this theory, there is no room for the idea of social determinism. If there is any compulsion or determinism it is of the individual and operates through the individuals. The society has no role in this matter. Hence, there can be no social determinism as emphasized by the advocates of social determinism.

In the same way, if we accept the fourth theory, and consider the individual and individual's personality as a raw material or an empty pot, then the entire human personality of the individual, his intellect, and his free will would be reduced to nothing but an expression of the collective intelligence and the collective will, which manifest themselves, as an illusion, in the form of an individual to realize their own social ends. Accordingly, if we accept the idea of the absolute essentiality and primariness of the society, there will be no place left for the idea of the freedom and choice of the individual.

Emile Durkheim, the famous French sociologist, emphasizes the importance of society to the extent of saying that social matters (in fact all the human matters, as against the biological and animal urges and needs, like eating and sleeping) are the products of society, not the products of individual thought and will, and have three characteristics they are external, compulsive, and general.

They are considered to be external, because they are alien to individual existence and are imposed from without upon the individual by society. They existed before the individual came into existence and the individual accepted them under the influence of society. Acceptance of the moral, social, and religious traditions, customs, and values by the individual comes under this category. They are compulsive, because they impose themselves upon the individual and mould the individual's conscience, feelings, thoughts, and preferences according to their own standards.

Because of being compulsive, they are necessarily general and universal. However, if we accept the third theory and consider both the individual and the society as fundamental entities—although admitting the power of the society as dominating that of the individual—it does not necessitate any compulsion or determinism for the individual either in human or social affairs.

Durkheimian determinism arises due to the failure to recognize the essential nature of the human being. Man's nature gives him a kind of freedom and liberty that empower him to revolt against social compulsions. On this basis, we may say that there is an intermediary relationship between the individual and the society that lies between the extremes of absolute freedom and absolute compulsion (*amr bayn al-amrayn*).

Although the Holy Qur'an attributes character, personality, reality, power, life, death, consciousness, obedience, and disobedience to society, it also explicitly recognizes the possibility of violation of social law by an individual. The Qur'an in this matter relies on what is termed as the (*Fitrat Allah*) 'Divine nature'.

In Surat al Nisa, The verse 97 refers to a group of people who called themselves "*mustad'afun*" (the oppressed and the weak) in the society of Mecca, and took shelter in their 'weakness and being oppressed' as an excuse for shirking their natural responsibilities. In fact, they considered themselves helpless as against the social compulsion and pressures. The Qur'an says that their excuse cannot be condoned on any ground, because at least they were free to migrate from the Meccan society to another one better suited for the fulfillment of their aspirations. Elsewhere it states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسُكُمْ

لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَن ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ

..

“O believers! You have charge of your own souls. He who goes astray cannot injure you if you are rightly guided.”(5:105)

The famous verse (7:172) regarding human nature states that man is bound by the Divine covenant to believe in monotheism (tawhid), and it has been made inherent in human nature. The Qur’an says further that it is ordained in this way so that people should not say on the Day of Judgement that “our fathers were idolaters and we did not have any other alternative except helplessly adhering to the faith of our forefathers.” (7:173) 3

With such a nature gifted to man by God, there is no compulsion to accept any faith contrary to the Divine will and to human nature itself.

The teachings of the Qur’an are entirely based upon the notion of human responsibility man is responsible for himself and for society. The dictum *al-’amr bil ma`ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar* (commanding others to do what is commanded by God and forbidding them from that which is prohibited by Him), is a command to the individual to revolt against social corruption and destructiveness.

This is the Qur’anic code of conduct prescribed for the individual to save society from chaos, disorder, and destruction. Tales and stories embodied in the text of the Qur’an deal mostly with the theme of the individual's revolt against a corrupt social order. The stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, the Companions of the Cave (Ashab al-Kahf), the believer of the tribe of the Pharaoh, etc. deal with the same theme.

The notion of social determinism is rooted in the misconception that society in its real composition needs complete merger of its constituent parts into one another and dissolution of their plurality into the unity of the `whole`. This process is considered to be responsible for the emergence of a new reality.

Either one has to accept that the personality, freedom, and independence of the individual are real, and so negate the reality of society and social structure (as in the case of the first and the second theories regarding the nature of society and the individual), or the reality of society is to be affirmed at the cost of the individual and his freedom and independence (as in the case of Durkheim's theory). Reconciliation between these two opposite viewpoints is impossible. As all the conjectures and arguments of sociology

support the supremacy of society, the opposite view is necessarily rejected.

In fact, from a philosophical point of view, all forms of syntheses cannot be regarded similar. On the lower levels of nature, i.e. minerals and inorganic substances, which in philosophical terms are governed by a 'simple force,' and as interpreted by the philosophers, act according to one and the same law, are synthesized in a way that they completely merge into one another and lose their individuality in the whole.

For example, in the composition of water, two atoms of Hydrogen and one atom of Oxygen are merged together, and both lose their individual properties. But at the higher level of synthesis, the parts usually retain a relative independence with respect to the whole. A kind of plurality in unity and unity in plurality manifests itself at higher levels of existence. As we see in man, despite his unity, a unique plurality is manifested.

Not only his lower faculties and powers preserve their plurality to some extent, but, at the same time, there is also a kind of continuous inherent opposition and conflict between his internal powers. Society is the strangest natural phenomenon in which all its constituent parts retain their individual independence to a maximum possible degree.

Hence, from this point of view, we have to accept that human beings, who are the constituent parts of a society in intellectual and volitional activity, retain their individual freedom, and, therefore, their individual existence precedes their social existence. In addition to this

fact, in the synthesis at the higher levels of nature, the generic character of the parts is preserved. The individual human being or the individual spirit is not determined by the social spirit; it rather preserves its right to think and act freely.

1. Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. I, p. 14.

2. Ibid.

3. Following verses are referred to :

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِن بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ ۖ شَهِدْنَا ۚ أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ ۚ أَوْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَشْرَكَ آبَاؤُنَا مِن قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِّن بَعْدِهِمْ ۚ أَفَتُهْلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! we bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: Surely we were heedless of this. [Or you should say: Only our fathers associated others (with Allah) before, and we were an offspring after them: Wilt Thou then destroy us for what the vain doers did? (7: 172–173)

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