
Sociology And Social Transformation: International Perspective

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The discipline of sociology is a product and a manifestation of social crisis. That is why it is argued that industrial society is the prime concern of sociology. It is also suggested that sociology is the offspring of modernity and its mission is to understand the specificity of the modern world. Further, it is contented that it is not sensible to speak of modern societies in the plural, because modern society is one, giving birth to the notion of global society. In fact some even argue that sociology can emerge only in modern, that is, industrial, post industrial and programmed societies. It is against this background that one should situate the theme of this symposium: sociology and social transformation.

Understanding Social Transformation

The tendency to view social transformation as an offshoot of changes in economy or polity, came into vogue thanks to the tripartite division of the world during the Cold War era. The persisting three-worldism is a product of this. I suggest that the taxonomy of the first, the second and the third world is singularly unsuited to understand social transformation because it ignores the centrality of society and consider social transformation as a by product of change in economy and/or polity. On the other hand the proclivity to construct a-one-world-society is far removed from the lived and experienced social reality.

I want to argue that to capture the

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contours of social transformation one should be clear about two things: one, the type of society in which social transformation is taking place because the point of departure necessarily impinges on the process of social transformation. Based on their internal social milieus one can categorize societies into three: stratified, heterogeneous and hierarchical. All societies are stratified based on age, gender and class. But heterogeneous societies are rendered more complex because of the simultaneous presence of two or more racial and cultural groups within them. Hierarchical societies add complexity not because of additional elements but because of the traditional value-orientations persisting in them. The causes and consequences of social transformation vary between stratified, heterogeneous and hierarchical societies.

Second, to understand social transformation one should be clear about the conception of society one holds. Broadly speaking there are three basic conceptions about society; society as unity, society as multiplicity and society as process. The idea that society is a unity gave birth to the organismic analogy, which views society as a highly integrated entity. In this perception change in one of the aspects of

society would necessarily release waves of repercussion on other aspects. But it was soon discovered that all aspects are not equally crucial and they are interconnected with varying intensity. The search for locating the most crucial dimension led to different types of determinisms based on economy, polity technology and culture. Soon it was realized that it is not empirically correct to hold that a particular aspect is eternally crucial in all societies. Thus the possibility of different societies having different core institutional orders came to be recognized. Similarly the fact that the core institutional order may not remain core in the same society for ever, that is a given society may experience change in its core institutional orders over different historical period also came to be accepted. For those who perceive society as a unity the crisis of social transformation manifest in the disturbance of the assumed integrity.

Individual Autonomy

The main deficit of this perspective is that it denies autonomy to individuals and treats them as mere sparks in the collective current of social life. Those who conceive society as a multiplicity argue that only individuals can see, feel, hate, love, or quarrel; they are real and concrete. This aggregative view of

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society is in contradistinction to the organic view of society upheld by realists. The crisis of social transformation therefore should be located in the erosion of agency and autonomy of individuals according to nominalists. However two issues remain unanswered; (1) How much autonomy should be conceded to individuals so that collective life is possible and (2) No satisfactory response could be provided by nominalists to the proposition that the whole is not merely the sum of its parts. Thus, the additional factor which emerges from the interaction of individuals and groups could not be satisfactory accounted for by nominalists.

It is in this context that the position of the cultural school which argues that society is a process, an event, an inter human reality, emerging out of the interaction between individuals, between individuals and groups and between groups gained currency. What is common to all societies, be they labelled as traditional, modern or post-modern, or pre-industrial, industrial or post-industrial, democratic or authoritarian, capitalist or socialist is that inter-personal, individual-group and inter-group relations exist in all of them. Therefore, the primary task of the discipline of sociology in its endeavour to understand the crisis of

social transformation is to analyze the quantum and quality of change in the process of social interactions. This is not to deny the importance of economic, political, cultural and technological factors in causing changes in the process of interactions between individuals, individuals and groups and between groups. But analyzing the manifestations of transformation which surfaces in these three contexts is the sole privilege of sociology. Ignoring this most sociologists most of the time fall an easy prey to one or another determinism— economic, political, cultural and technological—which ignores the centrality of society and the modes of interactions and their consequences for human beings living in them.

Summing up

I have noted above that broadly speaking depending upon their internal social milieus societies can be conceived as stratified, heterogeneous or hieratical and the point of departure substantially mould the content of social transformation. May I put it to you that we can identify four broad trends in social transformation in the contemporary world. They are:

I. From cumulative to dispersed dominance. Domination will continue but the social composition

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of the dominant and dominated and the contexts of their domination are constantly re-defined and negotiated.

II. Hierarchy and its attendant primordial collectivism are gradually giving way to equity resulting in the emergence of civil collectivism.

III. Plural societies in which the

constituent elements co-existed uneasily are transforming into multi-cultural societies in which the dignified co-existence of the different socio-cultural elements in them has become a possibility.

IV. Finally, the above processes are manifesting in the simultaneous demand for individual and inter-group equality without eroding personal and collective identity.

