The Conceptual Journey of Society

S.R. MEHTA

Anthropologists have been engaged in studying acephalous societies. An acephalous or a stateless society is not having any specialized political role or not even any institutionalized political structure constituting plurality of roles, a specialization that is specific mainly to the industrial societies. Political role implies an element of power through which one can either get certain things done or prevent things from being done by and on behalf of some collectivity of persons. In a stateless society, one can achieve ritual super integration in different ways beyond the political community by channelizing disruptive actions through complementary opposition of groups at various levels for having an integrative action. Basically, the intersecting kinship ties in the community provide an essential framework in influencing decisions on matters concerned to all groups. As a consequence of that, neither economic nor political ends, can be exclusively pursued by anyone to the detriment of such a society as these are intertwined with each other and are channeled and controlled by the beliefs and ritual practices of the group.

However, in the subsequent developments, society is viewed as an encompassing network of social relationships within a relatively independent self sufficient population characterized by internal organization, territory, cultural distinctiveness and sexual recruitment. It has also been conceived by some scholars as a group of human beings having a self sufficient system of actions that lasts longer than the life span of an individual, as the group gets recruited in part, by the process of sexual reproduction. However, in the view of the western thinkers, society is to be considered prior to and outside of the State. This distinction between the society and the state has been made on the basis of the social contract doctrine. But scholars like Hobbes contested such a distinction and treated the social contract, the law of nature and the civil society as almost identical. However, the liberal enlightenment scholar like Locke made a distinction between the law of nature and the social contract that had formed the State. According to him, there is a natural order assured by man's interdependence and his sense of the natural rights for all. It existed prior to and outside of the political institution. The State is therefore an utilitarian device for providing a more efficient, less cumbersome social order by developing a specialized apparatus for enforcing the natural law. In that context, the State becomes a dependent sector of a larger social order. Even some philosophers considered the church and the State as analytical functional aspects of a larger society (Sills, 1968).

However, the Enlightenment thought was considered inadequate as it was based on the concept of 'reason' that is, on analytical reduction, which implies that the complex whole must be reduced to its fundamental particles and again the whole is to be resembled by a *process* of deduction from the laws governing particles. In respect of society, the particle is the individual and the law governing particles derives from the quality of the natural reasons of individuals. However, there is an argument put forth against this in the sense that each man uses his reasons to rationally pursue his chosen ends. As such, the society as conceived to be an utilitarian device to derive social coherence and order from the faculty of reason in the individual, was not satisfactory. So, after the French Revolution, in the later part of 18th century, scholars were disenchanted with the conception of individual reason and the reduction methods of the analytical philosophies. As such, the emphasis

*Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

shifted on to viewing society as an organic integrated whole embodying the practical and profound wisdom of convention and tradition. This conservative organic unity conception of society suggested that the abstract analytical segments cannot be separated from the whole and changed in an arbitrary manner. For that to happen, there would be need to destroy the complex interdependence of the web of the social life. This organismic conception of society, apart from focussing on the set of interdependent functions (also implicit in the philosophy of Enlightenment) also emphasized cultural tradition as functionally necessary part of it.

Comte, in the early nineteenth century tried to synthesize the enlightenment and the organismic modes of thought. The classical liberal thought of an idea of level of order arising from man's natural economic interdependence and the collective moral order based on cultural tradition may provide social constraints on political action. The 19th century German thought of idealism also stressed on the cultural distinctiveness of each society. Marx, extended this ideal German thought in his economic conception of society. According to him, the elements of society are closely interwoven into a complex and distinctive whole. Both Hegel and Marx considered that society is undergoing continuous transformation according to the logic of immanent development. For Marx, society exists in the concrete relations between social groups. In other words, the real foundations of society and the real levels of social development find a place in the economic relations between men. The economic characterization of

society, outside the State and the Church, did not originate with Marx, as the utilitarian conception of society had already focussed on man's natural economic interdependence as a source of order prior to the State, but Marx was one who developed the idea of 'society as economy' in detail. The underlying basic assumption in Marx thought is that the most fundamental problem for man is to provide for his material needs. In order to accomplish that, men must cooperate with each other to enter into relations of production which should acquire stability to constitute economic structures. These structures are variable but invariably they involve two significant phenomena, one pertains to the division of men into classes and the other refers to exploitation of one class by another. Both the elements of stratification and exploitation are detrimental to the continuity of stability of economic structures as well as the complex whole machinery developed to support the economic order. The State, law, religion and ideology do bring in some temporary stability into the inherently unstable situations which ultimately culminate into change in political and social order through a change in the basic economic structure, referred as the substructure of society upon which the supporting institutions are placed in the form of a superstructure.

Society has also been conceived within the conflict theory mainly drawn from the Marxian perspective. The main thrust here is to view men as organisms competiting with one another to have access to the limited resources of life. However, the competing units are not the individuals but groups such as

families, classes, nations or races. It is thought that as the conflict between groups becomes stabilized, organized and regulated, there may be emergence of a structured society. Here, society is viewed as an organizational mechanism for relating population of organisms to an environment. In other words, it is a naturalistic account of society as it relates social life to natural life. But, the cultural and the normative phenomena remain intact as Sumner (1907) considers society as a consequence of antagonistic cooperation between competing organisms and groups. However, the phenomenon that emerges to stabilize, organize and regulate cooperation is a complex whole of customs, mores, conventions, laws and institutions.

Subsequently, we have also the emergence of an 'Utilitarian Society'. Here, the focus is on developmental sequences for every institutional sphere of society, that is, a movement toward the development of larger and more inclusive wholes. It is argued that with the processes of consolidation, conquest, incorporation and differentiation, societies tend to increase in scale and complexity. With this developmental sequence, conflicts between small factional groups, often unregulated, assumes less significance while the regulation of internal processes becomes more important. As a result, the relations with the environment and other societies, become more stabilized, and with the consolidation of a larger society, new forms of social organization become possible. This new social organization can be built upon the processes of free discussion, free exchange and the pursuit of individual interests, thereby, giving

rise to the reemergence of an utilitarian society, releasing the forces of creativity and innovating in the new forms of social organization.

In the historical growth and development, Tonnies (1887) formulates dichotmous forms of society, that is *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The *Gesellschaft*, in opposition to traditional form of *Gemeinschaft*, is viewed as a collection of individuals united only through ties of self interest. Durkheim, while critical of Tonnies' philosophical tradition, viewed society as a drift from that based on direct ties and commonalities, to the one based more on indirect interdependence. Within his evolutionary perspective, he emphasized on the interdependent reality of social facts such as vital rates, currents of opinions and established conventions. According to him, social facts require explanations of their own and society is an entity which cannot be reduced to a set of members or set of economic contracts between members. Instead, it exists in the complex relations and interdependence which unite members into an organic whole, reflected in the collective consciousness and moral order regulating them. Further, Simmel (1902-1907) also suggests that social level is the mutual influence that interacting persons have upon each other. This kind of mutual influence has coherent form and as people interact, they create society.

Weber (1922), stressed on a relatively nomilistic definition of collective entities and suggested a perspective of social order that gave independent reality to social processes. He opined that as persons orient themselves towards each other, social relationships get formed and this web of complex of social relationships constitute a social order. Following Tonnies, Weber stated that when actors take a rational orientation to each other, they create a *Gesellshaft* whereas when they adopt communal solidarity attitudes, they form a *Gemeinshaft*. But in each of the two cases, the resulting social order is not a mere collection of wills of people or of their economic interests, as it is given stability by an administrative organization that provides orientations to the systems of status and shared beliefs in the legitimacy of order.

In the United States of America, a social psychological perspective to delineate society was developed by Cooley, Mead and others emphasized on the concept of symbolic interaction for the integrated treatment of the society and the social person. They provided a novel conceptualization of society and considered it as a symbolically regulated process. According to Mead, the human being comes to acquire a social personality as he learns to communicate symbolically. As he learns to adopt the perspectives of others, he also starts learning to regulate his own activity symbolically by defining his self and his activities in appropriate ways. It is the participation in that complex of differentiated and interrelated roles that we refer to 'society', wherein we develop our distinctively human capacities and identities. Also, it is through adopting, playing and imaginatively constructing social roles that we develop social personality. So, for the scholars belonging to interpretive school of sociology, self and society are intimately connected through the concept of role Mead (1934), suggests that the analyst can move in either direction, that is, he may stress either on socialization process by which the social organism is socially formed or he may emphasize the process by which interacting persons create and transform the society.

Society is also viewed by some scholars as a process. It is argued that if the society is more than the sum total of its individual participants, than its reality should also be in the organized relations as a consequence of interaction of men. Of course, the units of their relations are not men but their activities. It may be apt to mention here that even, Durkheim while emphasizing on the independent reality of the social, stressed that the coherence of society depends upon the interdependence of activities and the moral regularities created by interaction.

In the historical past, the social thinkers discussed above, focussed on the conception of society by examining the nature of social reality and its modes of constraints. No serious attempt was made to define the units and boundaries of concrete societies as entities. In the contemporary sociological analysis, society has been conceived as a social system. As is well known, a social system is an organized set of interdependent social persons, activities or forces. In this framework, society is conceived as a system because its organization evolves mechanisms for maintaining an equilibrium or some other constancy in relation between the units; even in the face of environmental change. No doubt, earlier thinkers like Spencer and Pareto, also employed the approach of social system to visualize society but it was elaborated by the modern school of structural-functional (Aberle et.al, Levy/Persons 1951). According to this school, 'A Social System which

meets all the essential functional prerequisites of long term persistence from its own resources, will be called a Society'. The key concept involved here is that of self sufficiency.

Another contemporary conception of society which has got currency in the present time in the wake of globalization, treats it as an overlapping process system. It is believed that many of the historic and contemporary problems associated with the conceptualization of society may get clarified if we consider it as a complex of an overlapping process system. This may mean abstracting from a concrete interaction of social persons and a number of interacting systems such as economic, religious, political, educational and other activities that may cohere together into partially independent systems with units, boundaries and mechanisms of their own. The various systems enunciated above overlap and when these cohere around a common population on a broader range of spectrum, then we may speak of a society. However, such a society will not be self contained as it will overlap with the other society and its boundaries will not be uniform across its constituent systems.

According to Parsons (1946), the notion of a self-sufficient society is basically absurd. In his opinion, any society has in at least some other trade and cultural exchange with at least one other society, as such the conception of a self-sufficient society is anomalous. If we conceive any society as self-sufficient, then it not only implies, that it is isolated but even its social system has sufficient cultural materials and role opportunities to carry on its controlled relations with an environment. This

is an impossible task.

However, there are some problems associated with this perspective. One such problem arises due to relations between the society and other groupings. One such grouping is community which has been used in a variety of ways and needs to be distinguished from the society. Some of the scholars view communities as local based units of a larger society while others consider them as some aspect of society, pertaining to its solidarity dimensions such as communal or spatial. For example, German Sociologists consider communities as solidary types of societies. It is appropriate and legitimate to refer 'community' to both locally based units and to some other aspects of a larger society, but the argument is that society is sustained mainly by its population. In order to establish the boundaries of a societal population, one may have to opt for a definition of population adopted by bio-ecologists. According to them, a population consists of the self perpetuating inhabitants of a territorial area, the term 'self perpetuation' indicating mating while 'inhabitant' denoting relatively a permanent residence. In that sense, the boundaries of a population that sustains a society are established by the limits of a larger territorial area within which mating is common and residence is relatively permanent. However, one must realize that the society is not the population alone but the complex system of action in which the units of population interact and participate.

In the modern world, there is uprising of local traditional community based cleavages which find a niche for themselves through national political systems. Even such

phenomena are visible in the international arena across the national boundaries through the resurgence or respective diaspora of nation-states. In such a situation, the sociological analysis of society will be inadequate if it is confined rigidly to the realm of national boundary and keeps itself shut completely from the constraints imposed by this emergent global level of social reality. (Sills, 1968).

In the last few decades, we have entered into an era of information society which has brought in the concept of society as a global 'Village'. We are now in the age of communication or information revolution not only for the developed but even for the developing societies. The technological breakthrough in computers, fax, internet, electronic mail, and electronic governance, satellite television, and electronic media, print media, advertising media, telecommunication especially cellular phones etc., have shrunk the world and the older conception of society as of interacting within a territory for a delimited geographical area has been replaced by a conception of society based on symbolic sharing of contents of communication and interaction through a medium of language on day-to-day basis by persons within and across national boundaries to establish negotiated understanding with one another related to their individual interests and motivations through various media available to them. The holders of media of communication have become key players in manipulating and controlling money and power. This has enabled to establish economic and political hegemony of the developed societies over the developing ones, besides unleashing the

cultural invasions on them. This again makes the concept of national sovereignty absurd in conceptualizing a society, circumscribed by a territory.

In the modern conceptualization of society, no doubt the Parsonian framework of treating society within the system perspective through the structural differentiation processes of internal social integration and system integration vis-à-vis the external environmental challenges, may be satisfactory but it is not sufficient. The conflict theory drawn mainly from the Marxian perspective emphazing on competing groups for access to the resources of life through an organizational device that stabilizes, organizes and regulates these conflicting or competing groups towards cooperation by establishing a negotiated set of understanding in between them, may come closer to the contemporary scenario.

The other perspective which explains the phenomenon of society in the current sense in that of symbolic interactions of the interpretative school of sociologists who have vouched for connection between self and society through the differentiated and interrelated roles of persons involved in the interacting situations or settings within or across the national boundaries. However, in the context of the Indian society, the organismic conception, emphasizing on cultural tradition as a functionally necessary part of the society, also appears appropriate as our society is basically integrated by the profound wisdom of our conventions and traditions derived mainly from our ancient texts developed by our sages and seers. We have a whole complex of customs, mores, conventions and laws evolved in our system or way of life that brings in cooperation between competing organisms and groups, thus making our society a viable proposition and reality.

A similar idea for the formation of society was also suggested by Sumner (1907). But as a consequence of modernizing and industrializing influence of the developed world, we are affected by the processes of globalization and our society is also becoming a part of the overlapping process of this system. In fact, we are caught in a dilemma. On one side, we want to retain and maintain our cultural traditions while on the other the side, we want to catch up with the lifestyle of the developed world. In this transitional phase of development, the paradox of traditional co-existing with the modern in our social life in turning out to be a reality, especially so in the urban centres. There are also now visible effects of modern way of life in our rural areas and some of our structural and organizational arrangements through centuries old established cultural traditions are weakening and new institutional arrangements and cultural forms are emerging. This necessitates a new understanding of the Indian society as the external system is impinging heavily on our internal arrangement of the web of our social relationships, mores, norms, values and social ethos and creating contradictions and confusions beyond the comprehension of available perspectives with us.

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