

RECONCILING SOCIAL UNITY AND  
CULTURAL PLURALITY: AN ORGANIC  
AND IDEALISTIC APPROACH<sup>\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> M. Maruf, "Organismic Model: Mutuality and Harmony between Men and with Nature", ISM Meeting, July 19-22, 1980, Section III, London.

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex relationship between social unity and cultural plurality, emphasizing the need to approach society through an organic model and culture through an idealistic perspective. It critiques the mechanical and rigid views of social organization, highlighting their failure to foster genuine social unity. Instead, it advocates for a dynamic, interactive society where components, such as individuals, are fluid and capable of internal interaction. The article also discusses the diversity and integration of cultures, challenging Oswald Spengler's rigid views on cultural isolation and promoting the idea that cultures evolve and interact with one another. It concludes that societal unity and cultural plurality can coexist when approached with a fluid, organismic view of society and an idealistic, integrative view of culture, as emphasized by thinkers like Allama Iqbal. The concept of "unity in diversity" is essential for a harmonious and progressive society, supported by cultural interactions and shared human experiences.

This article explores the implications of 'SOCIETY AND UNITY'. The subject is a complex one consisting of two seemingly disparate concepts, i.e., 'SOCIAL UNITY' and 'CULTURAL PLURALITY' with a conjunction between them. At the very outset the two concepts put me in mind of two theories which have been quite popular to this day: I mean, the mechanical Model of the Society<sup>1</sup> as regards 'SOCIAL UNITY', and Oswald Spengler's view of the Relations between the Cultures<sup>2</sup> in connection with 'CULTURAL PLURALITY'. I propose to base my discussion on an examination of these two theories in the main. The validity of the topic for discussion will be determined by whatever view of 'Society' and 'Culture' do we take. In the sequel, then, I choose to begin with a discussion of these two concepts.

### **Society and 'Social Unity'**

There are three kinds of views on Society' or 'Social Organization': (i) the mechanical or materialistic view of Society, including its mildest form, Epiphenomenalism; (ii) the Mentalist or Spiritualist view of 'Society' advocated by George Berkeley through to the recent idealists: and (iii) the Organic or 'Organismic view of thinkers like Herbert Spencer, Lester Ward, Adolf Meyer, the Social Darwinists through to Allama M. Iqbal in our own times.<sup>3</sup> Of these, the most rigid view of Social Unities has been offered by the Mechanical Model. The model under consideration presents the type of Society marked by 'rigidity', and in extreme cases leading to complete 'preclusion' of interaction between various social units (i.e., Leibnizean model). It cannot lead to social unity, but to social diversity, for without mutual interaction no wider social organization can emerge. Even the Organismic view<sup>4</sup>, fails to serve its 'organizational purpose so long as the units, individualistic or ecological, remain 'fixed' and 'rigid''. Mario Bunge has subjected the Organismic view of Mach to criticism on the ground that for him 'interdependence' meant "mutual dependence among the existents, a static net of reciprocal dependence like that among the parts of a steel frame".<sup>5</sup> Thus, so long as the reference is structural rather than functional and "fluid", any model is destined to fail in doing justice to the question of 'social organization'. No introduction of concepts like 'equifinality' and 'multifinality', of purpose and goal-seeking, self-regulation and adaptation will help

to retrieve the situation, for it will not yield a truly Organismic Model of the Society.<sup>6</sup>

A truly Organismic society, i.e., the one which can guaranty a genuine social organization', calls for the following pre-conditions: (i) the Society is conceived as an organic whole wherein the parts as well as the whole mutually and continually interact, unfettered within any 'fixed' boundaries; (ii) the components of the whole, which are individuals in the last resort, are themselves conceived as 'fluid and capable of internal' interaction; (iii) these components, in order to fulfil the above pre-conditions, should themselves be conceived as mental or 'spiritual' entities, with 'body' serving for the mere 'local reference'; and (iv) there exists intimate relationship of mutual invasion between the Society and the environment, causing 'tension' and leading to the emergence and sharpening of the sense of 'self-awareness', which serves to determine an individual as well as a society.<sup>7</sup> Now, a society so determined is one which is free of all territorial, linguistic, nationalistic, and 'blood' relationships: in short, a universal society or the 'Kingdom of God on earth'<sup>8</sup> envisaged by all the great religions of the world. Only such a society can present a model of genuine 'Social Unity' or Organization. In the words of the Holy Quran, He created you from a single being...<sup>9</sup> However, over- organization of society as envisaged by the Marxists, is neither in point nor desirable, for it involves its own nullity. Any society which admits of indefinite expansion and progress consists of constituents, which are both homogeneous and heterogeneous.

### **What is Culture?**

In its broadest sense, culture may be described as all that achievement or progress of man which is not the result of 'maturation only. having a social import. According to Salvador Giner, culture entails two things: (i) it entails a learning process (IV, 3) which takes place through human interaction",<sup>10</sup> and (ii) it "is shared by groups, collectivities and members of institutions". However, one of the most classical definitions of the word 'culture' comes from Sir Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*. For him it is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society",<sup>11</sup> This 'complex whole', however, is not something consciously acquired; it is rather the result of a long process of 'incubation', which is most of the part going on under the superficial conscious levels over centuries in the life of a

community or society. P.G. Grasso makes it more certain when he defines 'culture' as "a relatively integrated set of ideas, values, attitudes and norms of life which possess a certain amount of stability in a given society,..."<sup>12</sup> The process which leads to the emergence of culture is psychologically known as 'culturation'.

### **Diversity and Integration of Cultures**

Since there are degrees of 'culturation', there are levels of culture, for like an individual the society also passes through a continuous process of 'culturation',<sup>13</sup> and at any given period of time in the history of mankind different societies betray varying levels or stages of the attainment of its fruits. This variation in attainment begets a diversity of cultures. Ruth Benedict, a recent writer on Sociology, in *Patterns of Culture*, expounds the diversity of cultures through an Indian chief who, after comparing culture of a people to a cup, beautifully remarks, "They all dipped in the water, but their cups were different".<sup>14</sup> However, the most rigid view on the diversity of cultures comes from Oswald Spengler in his classic *The Decline of the West*. His basic thesis is that each culture is a 'specific organism' having no inter-connection with cultures preceding or succeeding it.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the seeming inter-connection Spengler argues, "Since every young Culture superficially shows form-elements of older Cultures, these elements are supposed to have had continuing effect (fortgewirkt), and when a set of such effects has been strung together, the historian regards it with satisfaction as a sound piece of work".<sup>16</sup> He holds that this mode of treatment rests upon the idea, which inspired the great Gothics long ago, "of a significant singleness in the history of all mankind".<sup>17</sup> Spengler concludes his discussion thus: "Searching through all Cultures, then, one will always find that the continuation of earlier creations into a later Culture is only apparent, and that in fact the younger being has set up a few (very few) relations to the older being, always without regard to the original meanings of that which it makes its own".<sup>18</sup> As Allama Iqbal, in his lecture on "The Spirit of Muslim Culture", has pointed out, Spengler has advocated this rigid view simply to preclude any possibility of the modern culture being indebted to the Islamic culture.<sup>19</sup> He quotes from the opposite views of another renowned European historian Dr. Robert Briffault who in his book *The Making of Humanity* acutely remarks, "Science is the most momentous contribution of Arab civilization to the modern world, Other and manifold influences from the civilization of Islam communicated its first glow to European life".<sup>20</sup> It was not only an

indirect impact, he admits; a direct influence came to Europe through its scholars like Roger Bacon (d. 1294) and Francis Bacon (d. 1626), who brought to the West not only findings of the Muslims, but also the experimental method itself.<sup>21</sup> In fact, such a rigid view as advocated by Spengler finds little backing today. As salvador Giner, a living sociologist, has remarked, “Rigidity is often a sign of vulnerability”.<sup>22</sup> If there were no cultural interaction, the history of human culture would have been long ‘dead’.

The facts of ‘paranormal’ and ‘extra-sensory’ phenomena like telepathy, clairvoyance, etc. have convincingly proved that human mind or thought, which is the highest product of ‘culturation’, cannot remain confined within narrow human circuit; the same phenomena prove that the facts of culture cannot remain fettered within any territorial, national or temporal limits, it rather tends to overflow into the universal realm. In fact, human mind or thought can hardly be fettered within physical or national limits inasmuch as its waves tend to disperse and dissipate like waves in a vast ocean. It tends to become cosmopolitan and universal which is the very essence of mind. Consequently, culture which is the highest manifestation of human mind or thought can hardly be fettered within any physical or national (ideological) bounds. Cultures are not like ‘windowless monads of Leibniz, they do interact, and they interact in a variety of ways. In the case of culture I tentatively agree with the advocates of ‘perennial philosophy, who liken philosophy, which is the pith of culture, to a ‘road’, having no beginning and end, and passing through different parts of the world at different periods. Ruth Benedict believes in the evolution of cultures and argues, ‘It is one of the philosophical justifications for the study of primitive peoples that the facts of simpler cultures may make clear social facts that are otherwise baffling and not open to demonstration’.<sup>23</sup> She suggests that in the study of our own cultural mechanism, “We need all the enlightenment we can obtain from the study of thought and behaviour as it is organized in the less complicated groups”.<sup>24</sup>

Culture is an ‘organic whole’, consisting of ‘traits’. Each culture is marked by its specific ‘traits’ which, “having no intrinsic relation one with the other, and historically independent, merge and become inextricable, ...”<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon accounts for the ‘integration’ of culture which is made possible by the fact of ‘assimilation’. In the words of Ruth Benedict, each culture is not only characterised by certain behaviour patterns and purpose, it selects some ‘traits’ in the surrounding region which it can use.<sup>26</sup>

The process of assimilation' may, perhaps, never be conscious, but it is 'integrative beyond all doubt. "The integration of culture is not in the least mystical", Ruth adds. "It is the same process by which a style in art comes into being and persists".<sup>27</sup> She explains cultures on the pattern of great art-styles'.<sup>28</sup> All cultures do not attain to the same degree or level of integration, but cultures which have achieved it 'are more or less successful attainments of integrated behaviour, ..."<sup>29</sup> Ruth has stressed upon the importance of, what she calls, "characteristic configurations"<sup>30</sup> of the 'traits' which go to form cultures of different regions and tribes. While discussing "integration and configuratin', she compares a culture to an individual; just as an individual interacts with his environment and 'assimilates' what is useful, and betrays" a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action";<sup>31</sup> similarly, culture interacts with other, simultaneous and successive, cultures and shows a similar consistent pattern'. Thus, a culture grows like an individual and requires the same necessary conditions for life and action. The Book of God<sup>32</sup> emphasizes both 'diversity' and 'integration as two necessary aspects of human life and culture, expounding them as the Will of God, a part of the Plan of God.

### **Society and Culture**

Society and culture are reciprocal and inter-dependent. However, metaphysically speaking, we may approach from culture to the society. Each culture is marked by "its own world view, system of knowledge, mentality, moral standards, sense of the holy, and predominant forms of social relationships"<sup>33</sup> On the basis of these characteristics, Pitirim Sorokin makes a tentative distinction between two extreme types', i.e. 'Ideational culture' and 'Sensate Culture'; from a mixture of which evolves a third type, i.e., the 'Idealistic type'.<sup>34</sup> Of these, (i) the Ideational type, which perceives nature as non-material and basically spiritual, is found in most of the Eastern societies, and in all traditional societies; (ii) the Sensate type has its best manifestation in the present-day Western society which is through and through empirical and 'materialistic'; and (iii) the Idealistic type is a mixture of the two, and is marked by a balance between the spiritual and the temporal. Islamic society, at least, is one such society (the society envisaged by Islam and not the one found in Muslim countries), in so far as, in the words of Iqbal, the Quran "regards experience within and without as symbolic of a reality described by it as the First and the Last, the visible and the invisible' ".<sup>35</sup> Again, in the words of the Quran, "We will show them Our Signs in all the regions of the earth and in their

own souls, ...”<sup>36</sup> Both the Ideational and the Sensate types of culture are one-sided and abstract; it is the Idealistic type only which is concrete and comprehensive. Sensate culture, however, shares one very important characteristic with the Idealistic type, i.e., “Reality is not static being, but process, change, evolution, transformation”.<sup>37</sup> Such a view of culture ipso facto leads to an Organismic view of Society.

The above discussion shows that the paradoxical look of the subject ie, ‘SOCIAL UNITY and CULTURAL PLURALITY’, can be retrieved only if we take an ‘organic’ view of Society coupled with the Idealistic view of Culture (Idealistic in the sense discussed above). Unless the two are taken in a ‘fluid’ and dynamic sense, Social Unity and Cultural Plurality cannot go hand in hand.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Buckley, *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory*, (N.Y., Prentice-Hall, 1987), pp.8f.
- <sup>2</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Eng tr. With Notes by C.F. Atkinson, (London: George Allen, 1928), Vol. II, ch. Two.
- <sup>3</sup> Maruf, op. Cit., pp. 2-3.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 3f.
- <sup>5</sup> Mario Bunge, *Causality: the place of the Causal Principle in Modern Science*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959), p.91
- <sup>6</sup> Maruf, op. Cit., pp. 7-8
- <sup>7</sup> Dr. M. Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore, Ashraf, 1978), p.102
- <sup>8</sup> A.J. Arberry, *Javed-Namah* (Eng tr), intro. p.11
- <sup>9</sup> The Koran, N.J. Dawood’s Penguin Classics Eng. Tr., ch. “*The Hordes*”, v.6, p.279.
- <sup>10</sup> Salvador Giner, *Sociology*, (London: Martin Robertson, 1972), p. 90.
- <sup>11</sup> E.P. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, (London: Murray, 1871), Vol 1, p.1.
- <sup>12</sup> P.G. Grasso, *Personalita giovanile in transizione* (Zurich: Pas Verlag, 1964), p.1.
- <sup>13</sup> Iqbal expressly writes, “Like to a child is community..... and proceeds to explain how the communal life follow the same laws as an individual - A.J Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness* [Eng tr. of Iqbal’s Ramuz-i-Bekhud] (London, John Murray, 1953) pp.59ff
- <sup>14</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1968), p.15.
- <sup>15</sup> Dr. M. Iqbal, op. cit.p. 142.
- <sup>16</sup> Spengler, op. cit., p.55
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 57.
- <sup>19</sup> Iqbal, op. cit., pp. 142-43.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Briffault, *The Making of Humanity*, (Pakistan: Islamic Book Foundation, 1980), p. 202.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 201.
- <sup>22</sup> Giner, op. cit., p. 100.
- <sup>23</sup> Benedict, op. cit., p. 39.



<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 40

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> *The Koran*, cf. “Had Allah pleased, He would have united you into one nation”  
v. 93, p. 311.

<sup>33</sup> Giner, op. Cit., p. 103.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Iqbal, op. Cit., p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> *The Koran*, ch. “Revelations Well Expounded”, v. 53, p. 162.

<sup>37</sup> Giner, op. Cit., p. 103

