

SOCIETY AND UNITY – ORGANISMIC  
MODEL: MUTUALITY AND HARMONY  
BETWEEN MEN AND WITH NATURE\*

Dr. Mohammed Maruf

---

\* Paper presented at The meeting of The International Society for Metaphysics held At the Halliday Hall, London SW4, 19-22. July, 1980. This paper was presented in the evening session of 21-7-1980

## ABSTRACT

If society were a mere addition or conglomeration of individuals, one would directly take a start from the 'individual'; but the things are not so simple, for what complicates the matter is that the 'individual' and 'society' both need a mutual reference inasmuch as they are reciprocal and interdependent. It is, however, customary, and also in line with the scheme of the programme of current meeting of the ISM, to take a start from the individual, and to decide upon the nature of 'society' in the light of our view on him. Our theory of the society, then, will draw on whatever view we take of the individual and the 'interrelations' which obtain among the individuals constituting the society. On the organismic model, in any of its forms, the individual is pushed back into the background. On its individualistic interpretation, the individual being the basic component, he is relegated to a secondary position; while on the ecological interpretation, he is pushed back one step farther inasmuch as now the basic components are the 'sub-groups' rather than the individuals, who compose the sub-groups. The social organization, on this model, is the result of mutual interaction of the components, individuals or sub-groups, which moves towards a more and more stable equilibrium. Such a position tends to over-organization of the society which Iqbal has condemned on the ground that in an over-organized society "the individual is altogether crushed out of existence".

In dealing with such a subject as the nature of social organization it is not easy to decide upon the point of departure. If society were a mere addition or conglomeration of individuals, one would directly take a start from the 'individual'; but the things are not so simple, for what complicates the matter is that the 'individual' and 'society' both need a mutual reference inasmuch as they are reciprocal and interdependent. It is, however, customary, and also in line with the scheme of the programme of current meeting of the ISM, to take a start from the individual, and to decide upon the nature of 'society' in the light of our view on him. Our theory of the society, then, will draw on whatever view we take of the individual and the 'interrelations' which obtain among the individuals constituting the society. I must sound a warning at the very outset that any approach from the individual to society is at best only tentative, for there may be conceivable an ideal society the members whereof have yet to be discovered (we may call such a society a 'null society' after the fashion of the concept of a 'null class' in class-algebra or a 'null set' in modern mathematics). George H. Mead has suggested a very concrete start, i.e., we should rather begin with an 'interactional field' of interdependent organisms in an environment.<sup>1</sup> I, however, chose to make a start, a tentative one though, from the individual.

As said before, our view on society will, in large measure, be dependent on our view of the individual. If we were to conceive of an individual as a colony of 'windowless monads' after the fashion of Leibniz, then there would be no genuine social set-up even thinkable, for there would be no 'interaction' among the individuals in any intelligible sense. There is, however, a rich wealth of the views which permit of the requisite interaction, and these views may be broadly classified into three kinds:

(i) the materialistic views, culminating in mechanism, which conceive of the individual as a rigid, discrete entity, or at best, system explicable in terms of laws of dynamics or the behaviouristic 'stimulus- response' frame-work, hardly allowing any place to mind except, at best, if any, as an 'epiphenomenon'. Some extreme mechanists like A. M. Turing have gone to the extent of conceiving such devices as 'digital computers' and 'learning machines'<sup>2</sup> capable of performing higher human functions of 'memory', and 'thinking'.

All such theories reduce the individuals to rigid and ‘closed-off’ systems with ‘inter-relations’ introduced from outside. Moreover, such a scheme of things can hardly account for social behaviour and situation, for no arrangement of machines, however artfully made, can ever give the look of a social situation, still less of a ‘community’, even if so devised as to interact with each other.

(ii) the mentalist views as advocated by the followers of George Berkeley, according to which the individual is a ‘spirit’ or mind, with body only a constellation of ‘perceptions’ or ‘ideas’, to use Berkeleyan terminology. Such a view, however, fails to account for the resistance put up by the body as experienced in daily life. It is no less one-sided than the materialist views.

(iii) the organic or ‘organismic’ view, which treats of the individual as a unit of mind-body.

In the words of Adolf Meyer, “In this unit the development of the mind goes hand in hand with the anatomical and physiological development, not merely as a parallelism, but as a one-ness with several aspects”.<sup>3</sup> This view is complete insofar as it considers both mind and body. Iqbal,<sup>4</sup> however, advocates an organic view of individual with primacy still going to the mind.<sup>5</sup>

It is the last view which appears to succeed in accounting for social ‘interactions’ whence a true society stems. Following the lead of Herbert Spencer, some sociologists have propounded the ‘organismic’ model of society, the basic principle whereof is “the mutual dependence of parts” which makes society like an organism.<sup>6</sup> This model has been interpreted in two different forms:

(i) society may be conceived as an individual organism after the manner of Spencer and his followers:

(ii) society may be conceived as an ecological system or a species as done by Lester Ward and the Social Darwinists.

Ward argues that “neither species nor societies “die”, as do “organisms”.<sup>7</sup> Iqbal, however, agrees with the Spencerian view when he says, “Like to a child is a Community...”,<sup>8</sup> and proceeds to explain how the communal life follows the same laws as an individual, drawing a very close parallel between the two.<sup>9</sup> Against the above argument of Ward Iqbal will contend that societies die like organisms as is obvious from the old societies which have been completely wiped out by the passage of time. There is a clear indication in the Book of God that nations are punished en bloc<sup>10</sup> from which Iqbal draws the conclusion that nations are collectively judged and suffer

for their ‘misdeeds’.<sup>11</sup> Iqbal, however, does not agree with Spencer that creatures and societies alike exhibit cooperation among their components for the benefit of the whole.<sup>12</sup> He would agree with the Darwinists that the fundamental principle of social cohesion is ‘competitive struggle’<sup>13</sup> insofar as he believes that the life of an individual is “a kind of tension” caused by the mutual invasion of the individual and his environment.<sup>14</sup> He quotes the verse, “Descend ye as enemies of one another”<sup>15</sup> to prove that the principle of life and evolution is struggle and strife. Iqbal presents a more dynamic view of society through his synthesis of Spencer’s individualistic view of society with the Darwinist principle of struggle in life and evolution.

Now, whichever of the above positions, individualistic or ecological, is taken, two implications follow from it:

(i) the components of a social system, as well as the system itself, are ‘fixed’ and rigid; and

(ii) the individual is relegated to the second or third remove.

Taking the implication (i) first. On the individualistic view, the components are individuals which are rigid entities like the organs of the body; while on the ecological view, the components are themselves social ‘units’ or sub- groups which also retain more or less ‘fixed’ boundaries. Mario Bunge, while commenting on the organismic view of Mace, writes that by interdependence he did not mean genetic interrelation but rather mutual dependence among existents, a static net of reciprocal dependence like that among the parts of a steel frame.<sup>16</sup> Again, Ward contends that the struggle in evolution is not for “survival” of the organism, but more fundamentally “a struggle for structure”.<sup>17</sup> Talcott Parsons also lays emphasis on “a stable structure” as a reference point for change, but in due course this becomes the structure of the system...<sup>18</sup> He presents social system “as tending to maintain a relatively stable equilibrium by way of continuous processes which “neutralize” endogenous and exogenous sources of variability...”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the organismic model, though basically functional, remains static so long as it is ‘structure-bound’, and even the introduction of concepts like ‘equifinality’ and ‘multifinality’,<sup>20</sup> of purpose or goal-seeking, self-regulation, adaptation; and Neil Smelser’s theory of “value-added process”<sup>21</sup> fails to make the notion of society more ‘fluid’ and dynamic.

Taking the implication (ii) next. On the organismic model, in any of its forms, the individual is pushed back into the background. On its individualistic interpretation, the individual being the basic

component, he is relegated to a secondary position; while on the ecological interpretation, he is pushed back one step farther inasmuch as now the basic components are the 'sub-groups' rather than the individuals, who compose the sub-groups. The social organization, on this model, is the result of mutual interaction of the components, individuals or sub-groups, which moves towards a more and more stable equilibrium. Such a position tends to over-organization of the society which Iqbal has condemned on the ground that in an over-organized society "the individual is altogether crushed out of existence".<sup>22</sup> He adds that the ultimate fate of people depends, not so much on organization as on the "worth and power of individual men";<sup>23</sup> Also, such a scheme of things is self-abnegating insofar as it may tend to the abolition of the society itself, for no social set-up is conceivable without any reference to individuals. Moreover, it leads on to the 'process model' so popular with the Marxist school of thought.

The organismic model shall become more promising if we conceive of an individual as a mental unit rather than as a part of 'a steel frame', with 'body' being, at best, a mere frame of local reference. Iqbal suggests a purely mental view of the individual when he says that "to be self is to be able to say, 'I am'. Only that truly exists which can say, 'I am'".<sup>24</sup> The world or environment is there to help in the emergence and growth of this feeling of 'I am-ness' or 'self-awareness' by putting up an opposition to the individual. Same is the mechanism, says Iqbal, which works in the case of the society also, for society develops on the selfsame lines as an individual.<sup>25</sup> The feeling of 'self-awareness' needs two preconditions, which Iqbal has beautifully summed up in the following verses:

'But when with energy it falls upon  
The world's great labours, stable then becomes  
This new-won consciousness; it raises up  
A thousand images, and casts them down;  
So it creates its own history.  
.....  
The record of the past illumines  
The conscience of a people; memory  
Of past achievements makes it self-aware.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus, it is interaction between an individual and his environment which stabilizes the social consciousness of a people and creates its history but for which, Iqbal adds, “the folk again is lost in nothingness”.<sup>27</sup> This renders the ‘interactional field’ a very complex one wherein the individual, the society, and the environment all combine to interact with a view to forming a true and genuine social set-up. It also requires an ‘internal’ dynamism so that no external ‘inter-relationship’ need be imposed; else the whole set-up will turn out to be superficial and labour under the self-same defects as the ‘mechanical model’ of society.<sup>28</sup>

Summing up the whole discussion, then, a truly organismic model can be formed if the following preconditions are met:-

(i) the society is conceived as an organic whole wherein the parts and the whole mutually and continually interact, and are not fettered within ‘fixed’ boundaries,

(ii) the components, which are individuals in the long run, are themselves conceived as ‘fluid’ and capable of ‘internal’ interaction:

(iii) the individuals, in order to fulfil the above condition, are to be conceived as mental or ‘spiritual’ entities, with ‘body’ serving for a mere ‘local reference’; and

(iv) there exists an intimate relationship of mutual invasion between the individual (and for that matter, the society) and the environment, causing ‘tension’ and leading to the emergence and sharpening of the sense of ‘self-awareness’, which determines an individual as well as a society.

Now, a society so determined is one that is free of all territorial, linguistic, nationalistic, and ‘blood’ relationships; in short, a universal society or ‘the Kingdom of God on earth’.

## Notes and References

---

<sup>1</sup> A position taken in *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); cf. Walter Buckley's *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory* (N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1967), p.100.

<sup>2</sup> “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”, *MIND*, vol. LIX, No. 23 (1950); rep. *Mind and Machines* (ed.) Alan Ross Anderson (N.J., Prentice-Hall) PP. 25ff.

<sup>3</sup> “The Role of the Mental Factors in Psychiatry”, *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF INSANITY*, (1908), p.65.

<sup>4</sup> Iqbal, Dr. Mohammad (1877-1938), the national philosopher of Pakistan who advocated the idea of a separate Muslim home-land in the Sub-continent.

<sup>5</sup> He was very emphatic in advocating the primacy of mind: cf. *Asrar-i- Khudi*,

- 
- 'The partridge's leg is derived from the elegance of its gait, The nightingale's beak from its endeavour to sing'- [Eng. Tr. by R.A. Nicholson, *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore: M. Ashraf, rep. 1975), p.25]
- <sup>6</sup> Buckley, op. cit., p.12.
- <sup>7</sup> Ward, Lester, *Pure Sociology*, (N.Y., Macmillan, 1903), p. 184.
- <sup>8</sup> Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, [an Eng. Tr. of Dr. M. Iqbal's *Ramuz-i-Bekbud*] (London: John Murray, 1953), p. 60ff.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59ff.
- <sup>10</sup> The Holy Quran, VII, 25.
- <sup>11</sup> Iqbal, Dr. M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: M. Ashraf, rep. 1977), p. 138. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 A.D.), the great Muslim thinker, advocated similar views in *The Muqaddimal*, Eng. Tr. Franz Rosenthal, (N.Y., Pantheon Books, 1958) in two volumes.
- <sup>12</sup> Spencer H., *Principles of Sociology*, 3d, ed., (N.Y., Appleton-Century- Crofts, 1897), Pt. 2, p.592.
- <sup>13</sup> Buckley, op. cit., p. 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Iqbal, op. cit., p. 102.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.
- <sup>16</sup> *Causality: the Place of the Causal Principle in Modern Science*, (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 91.
- <sup>17</sup> Ward, op. cit., p. 184.
- <sup>18</sup> Buckley, op. cit., p. 15.
- <sup>19</sup> "Some Considerations on the 'Theory of Social Change'", *Rural Sociology*, quoted by Buckley, op. cit., pp. 13-14.
- <sup>20</sup> Bertalanffy, Ludwig von, *Problems of Life*, (N.Y., Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 142ff.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Theory of Collective Behaviour*, (N.Y., Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 382.
- <sup>22</sup> Iqbal, op. cit., p. 151.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.
- <sup>25</sup> Arberry, op. cit., it is the basic theme of Iqbal's book.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>28</sup> Buckley, op. cit., pp. 8 ff.