Human Nature And Society

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Abstract

This paper argues that the myriad contexts of human existence and practices mold human nature. It does so by reference to the work of some prominent voices in the field of social sciences. The nature-nurture debate most famously and eloquently emerges in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Different actors in different historical eras bending to their respective imperatives of social, political, and economic organizations have conceptualized human nature to justify violent projects such as that of eugenics or ethnic cleansing. Yet there are several uplifting but contrary examples of compassion, kindness, and empathy—qualities that are regarded as *natural* to human nature. The functional rationality of a social organization lies in its claim of fulfilling human needs, which is based on an understanding of human nature. As Mary Clark (2005: 11) points out, '…the belief a society holds about human nature in particular tends to *create* the very behavior they *predict.'* Human nature is a foundational category of social, political and economic theory.

Keywords: Human nature; society; discourse; rationality; mystification

Human Nature: A Foundational Paradigm

This paper argues that the myriad contexts of human existence and practices mold human nature. It does so by reference to the work of some prominent voices in the field of social sciences. The nature-nurture debate most famously and eloquently emerges in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Different actors in different historical eras bending to their respective imperatives of social, political, and economic organizations have conceptualized human nature to justify violent projects such as that of eugenics or ethnic cleansing. Yet there are several uplifting but contrary examples of compassion, kindness, and empathy—qualities that are regarded as *natural* to human nature. The functional rationality of a social organization lies in its claim of fulfilling human needs, which is based on an understanding of human nature. As Mary Clark (2005: 11) points out, '…the belief a society holds about human nature in particular tends to *create* the very behavior they *predict.'* Human nature is a foundational category of social, political and economic theory.

The study of human nature inevitably involves engaging with the nature-nurture debate. However, the binary of nature-nurture is not the only lens through which human nature is examined. The analysis gets knotty when ideologues (both politicians and academics) do a selective, often expedient culling from the binary and present it as 'natural' and scientific. Ethnic, religious, racial and national stereotyping is one such example.[1] And if you have the iconic status of a Samuel Huntington, you can then pigeonhole an entire 'civilization'. If the public 'buys' it, a whole range of organizations (e.g., the military-industrial complex) and their activities get legitimized.

The Mystifications of 'Nature': Legal, Natural, Social

While reading on human nature our attention was drawn to the hyphenated character of the term. In our view, it is the latter part (of the term) which 'mystifies' the whole. Embedded in the popular notion of nature is a legal metaphor, that is, of the law(s) of nature. The British biologist and historian of science, Joseph Needham suggests that according to the Western assumption of science, nature is lawful and regular. This assumption has enabled scientists to formulate laws of nature analogous to the laws by which human societies operate.[2] Implied in this supposition of laws of nature is a normative belief; these laws enjoy the de facto status of edicts issued by a supra-personal, supra-rational being.

However, this perspective that *human nature is natural* and unchanging contains two opposing viewpoints. The *first* postulates that human beings are selfish, egoist individuals in pursuit of their respective interest; Thomas Hobbes, free market advocates—Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer, libertarian thinkers—Robert Nozick, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman are some of the prominent advocates of this perspective. The *second* makes a case for altruistic peace-loving individuals such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Mahatma

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[1] Post-partition, the dominant discourse in both India and Pakistan constructs the other as being 'by nature' cruel and untrustworthy. Ronald Reagan could use the popular Star Wars parlance to designate the Soviet Union as an *evil empire*.
[2] Joseph Needham argues that the fact that as late as 1730 a Swiss court prosecuted a rooster for laying an egg (and convicted him and burned him at the stake) suggests that the legal metaphor has been taken quite literally. Hubbard, R., *The Politics of Women's Biology* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990: 7.

Gandhi, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the Communitarian School advocates such as Michael Sandel. Both these essentialist assumptions have been challenged, and the most serious attack has been mounted from the Marxist and feminist perspectives that human nature is *social*. Interestingly, they do not deny the selfish and altruistic dimensions of human nature but only argue that this is a result of the social context. This view informs C.B. Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism.*

Macpherson argues that it is the seventeenth century market society's ethos of 'possessive individualism' that under girds Thomas Hobbes's conception of human nature. In Hobbes's state of nature, human life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. In the absence of any rule of law it is a 'state of war of all against all' since men are selfish and are guided by avarice to pursue their own individual self-interest. Hobbes saw an all powerful sovereign as the only way to get out of the state of nature. Macpherson argues that Hobbes was writing at a time when capitalism was still in its nascent stages; the transition from feudalism to capitalism was not yet complete. Periods of transition are usually marked by a chaos. The Leviathan, therefore, was necessary to meet the needs of the seventeenth century English capitalism.[3]

The atomistic, selfish and rational individual was the premise on which the free market and its political and social edifice were justified. And as Mary Clark (2005) demonstrates through her billiards ball[4] model, the 'self-centered, me first' competing for survival individual creates a society characterized by power struggle, where there is need for social control (norms, mores) to suppress violence. Rule of law and a belief in retributive justice are a logical consequence. This essentially Hobbesian lens is also employed to describe the international arena as a state of anarchy making wars between nation-states inevitable. Post 'fall of communism', the neoconservative think tanks are busy building up a case for the US to take up the role of a 'benevolent' Leviathan, a global policeman, to keep in check the rogue states and the rogues within the states. Authoritarian regimes in the South are also justified on similar grounds.[5]

Discursive Formations of Human Nature

What we find particularly interesting is how the dominant paradigm of each historical age is incorporated into the socioeconomic, religious, political and *scientific* ideas and belief system of that particular epoch.[6] For example, note how Darwin's theory of evolution finds resonance in the justification of colonialism. The colonial discourse presented the colonies as being inhabited by backward people who needed to be guided

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[3] Macpherson (1962: 197) has a similar explanation for John Locke's social contract theory. Locke 'read back into the nature of men and society certain preconceptions about the nature of seventeenth century man and society which he generalized quite unhistorically...'

[4] Clark (2005) argues that in the Western worldview all entities in the universe are isolated, discrete objects that have distinct boundaries. This Newtonian model applies the same rationale to explain society which is viewed as an aggregate of discrete individuals.

[5] A recent example is that of President Musharaff. The US State and the Pakistani middle and upper class continue to support him because his dictatorship is seen as the only way to stall the fundamentalist groups and the 'tried and test failed' 'corrupt' 'liberal' political parties from coming to power and taking the country to a 'certain ruin'.

[6] The title of the series of historian Eric Hobsbawm's work provide useful insights- The Age of Revolutions (1789-1848), The Age of Capital (1848-1875), The Age of Empire (1875-1914) and The Age of Extremes (1914-1991)

onto a civilized path; the 'anachronistic' beliefs, practices and organizations *needed* to be replaced by the rational and modern ones. The same stance reverberates in one of the many justifications given by President Bush for the Afghan and Iraq Wars. US presence is presented as an effort to bring democracy in these countries. The World Bank and International donor agencies claim to do a similar good deed by organizing free markets in the 'backward' countries. This reminds us of the 1960s modernization thesis put forward by W.W. Rostow (1959),[7] it may be outdated in theory but is alive in practice.

In this context we would like to enter into a debate with those who argue for the revival of indigenous and traditional practices and lifestyles. The outcry seems basically a quixotic exercise of 'tilting at the windmills.' For us the major flaw in this argument is their underlying naïve belief that 'islands' of indigenous and traditional lifestyles can be created in a world that is characterized by powerful homogenizing forces of globalization. Pertinent to recall here is the example of the casinos built on the land reclaimed by some of the American Indian tribes from the US government. The indigenous is thus reduced to a mere artifact (which is further sought to be frozen in time). Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy and strategy provides some cues to resolve this dilemma as he strived to make a judicious blend of tradition and modernity. Gandhi's holistic approach can be evidenced from his revival of the spinning wheel.[8] To do so successfully, he ensured that foreign cloth was boycotted[9] by the Indians. The latter was possible because he made the coarse white *khadi* cloth a 'fashion statement'. All this was accompanied by his advocacy of the merits and ethics of a simple lifestyle. Gandhi saw all these measures as crucial spokes of his non violence wheel. His philosophy was premised on the belief that human nature is essentially non violent. As a master strategist he employed what Mary Clark (2005: 162) describes as the three psychic propensities of human social behavior, i.e., meaning, bonding, and autonomy. His vision of the organization of independent India's economy, society and politics incorporated this. We recall here his exhortation to Congressmen to disband the Congress Party. He could foresee the Congress becoming embroiled in power politics in post independent India; this institutionalization would be the death knell of the Congress as a movement. Gandhi subscribed to a very radical concept of the state. He visualized the political governance structures as networks of *panchayats*[10] where political parties had no role to play. He was not seduced by the Western concept of the modern state. Unlike Jawahar Lal Nehru[11] who saw efficiency and progress in Max Weber's legal rational authority, Gandhi saw in it alienation.

Embedded in this ethos of rationality is one of the most controversial (especially from the radical quarters) institutions of the modern age i.e., the prison. We will refer to the works of Jeremy Bentham (2000)

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[7]According to W.W. Rostow's (1959) thesis, while states in the west had modernized, the postcolonial societies lagged far behind in what is essentially a linear path of modernization/development. He stratified the latter states further by identifying some of them as being relatively more developed and ready to 'take off'.
[8] The spinning wheel gave employment to the poor Indians.
[9] The boycott dented the British textile industry severely.
[10] *Panchayat* is a form of local self-government.
[11] Independent India's mixed economy development model was euphemistically termed the 'Nehruvian Project'. Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, saw the big dams, engineering and medical colleges, steel plants as the 'new temples' of modern India.

and Michel Foucault (1979).[12] In the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham it is in the human nature of individuals to seek pleasure and avoid pain. The state had to pursue *maximum good for the maximum number of people.* To achieve this goal the state had to isolate those who threatened to disrupt the order. Who were they? They were more often than not individuals marginalized by the 'market', those whom the fruits of capitalism had bypassed. Implicated in the human nature discourse (i.e., atomistic, egoist individuals) of early liberal philosophers was the necessity to control those who questioned the status quo. Contradictions of the capitalist economy created a new class of the poor. The reality of political disenfranchisement of the majority in a society that employed the language of natural rights of man gradually made the hypocrisy and double standards of the rich evident. The institution of the prison, therefore, became an extremely important part of the new social, political and economic organizational arrangement (Cayley 1998).

Michel Foucault borrowed Bentham's 'panoptican vision' to critique the prison system (primarily of the western society). One of the greatest myths of our times is that the prison is an essential and inevitable destination on the route of the *justice system.* Michel Foucault exposed this myth by drawing attention to the social processes and structural imperatives which *constructed* a new class of deviants (e.g., 'mad people', homosexuals). In *Madness and Civilization,* Foucault gave the name 'The Great Confinement' to that period in mid-seventeenth-century Paris when 1 percent of the population was institutionalized in an effort to control the 'masterless men' produced by the first great capitalist revolution and make Paris 'safe for the bourgeoisie'. In this context the following question becomes self-explanatory. Is it a mere coincidence that the poor African Americans constitute the majority of the American prison population today? (Cayley 1998). Foucault's (1979) critique of the quintessential modern institution as a context of discipline, regimentation and control is valuable. 'Is it surprising', Foucault asks, 'that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (1979: 228).

This issue of socialization provides a useful entry point to discuss feminist scholarship which offers valuable insights on the subject. Feminists make a distinction between sex and gender as natural and social categories respectively.[13] The conflating of the categories of sex and gender by the patriarchal discourse leads to the construction of notions of femininity and masculinity. This has significant social and political consequences. Any digression from this patriarchal script leads to overt and covert forms of ostracization. Examples from across national cultures elucidate this point. Hillary Rodham Clinton gave in to Hillary Clinton who 'stood by her husband'. South Asian women political leaders need the stilts of legitimate relationship with a man to create a niche for themselves in politics e.g., Indira Gandhi (the *daughter* of Jawahar Lal Nehru), Sonia Gandhi (the *widow* of Rajiv Gandhi) and, Benazir Bhutto (*daughter* of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto). In most societies[14] the role of the mother is the only legitimate one for a woman. This leads to the asexualizing of the woman as a wife. The wife is expected to be motivated not by sexual desire but by the 'selfless service' ethic;

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[12] Foucault (1979) argues that imprisonment is *the* characteristic institution of the modern state. He points out its ability to translate the diverse and heterogeneous acts that constitute 'crime' into a uniform arithmetic of prison time.

[13] See, Stanley 2002

[14] See Kakar (1981), Kurtz (1992), & Uberoi (2005)

and yes, when the occasion demands has to be the surrogate mother to her Oedipal complex*ed* husband. Is it not significant that according to popular discourse in India a woman to be 'complete' must be a mother?

No discussion on human nature and social organization will be complete without a reference to questions raised by the phenomenon of globalization. Does globalization lead to homogenization or to a national/regional resurgence? Is glocalization a more accurate term to describe the transformation of third world societies today?

However, one thing is clear that change is taking place. There is greater inter-connectedness of economies. This probably explains the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism (Powell & Di Maggio 1991) that is occurring in the Indian economy. Indian business houses have begun to resemble foreign MNCs in terms of architecture, office interiors, salaries, role expectation and language.[15] This isomorphic change is also evident in Indian universities and colleges which mimic their American counterparts and the corporate sector. In some colleges of the university of Delhi, for example, the disciplines/departments and language programmes that cannot meet the 'needs of the market' are being phased out; the Indian languages programs. Today the value of a discipline is determined by its worth in the job market. Meyer and Rowan's thesis that 'organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society' (Powell and Di Maggio 1991:41) is useful in explaining the alterations that are currently taking place in India.

Liberalization of the Indian economy is witnessing or rather encouraging the emergence of the acquisitive insatiable consumer. However, these changing mores have detrimental social consequences. The satellite revolution *tells tales* about the lifestyles of the rich and famous.[16] The *have nots* in India now know[17] what the rich have; and the logic of democratic consciousness tells them that they have a right to it too. This mimetic desire[18] is inevitably going to manifest in violent ways.[19]

Conclusion

The paradox is that even as the 'world becomes flat' (Thomas Friedman 2005) we as human beings are going downhill. So where does redemption lie? Like Karl Marx, the structuralist often misunderstood as a determinist, we see hope in human volition.

Our paper is more a critique of the dominant discourse and structures than a discussion of its alternatives. We do this because we believe that critique is a prerequisite for change. We do recognize that

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[15] Young people employed at the call centers in India not only have to be proficient in the English language but have to be able to speak it with the 'right' accent. While on client calls, they have to temporarily adopt western names.

[16] A program by this name shown on satellite television appeared to us as a self-obsessive, narcissistic vulgar display of wealth. But in less than ten years the leading media group *Living Media* has come out with a high-priced magazine 'Style' on the same issue.

[17] Surveys show that even though basic hygienic conditions may be absent, slum dwellers have a television set.

[18] For a detailed discussion on Rene Girard's theory of mimesis see Redekop (2002).

[19] Crime is on the rise in urban areas—theft and robbery often resulting in murders (old people living alone have been vulnerable targets), rape of women, kidnapping for ransom, extortion of money from the rich by the 'underworld'.

alternative ways of being exist or to put it more bluntly struggle to exist. But they make a difference. Arjun Appadurai (1996) talks about the various constructive movements of grassroots globalization that are taking place in the world. History is replete with examples of the lives and works of women and men whose courage and commitment scoff at the billiards ball gestalt. Their lives and activities are an eloquent articulation of Mary Clark's Indra's net[20] and we anticipate them creating the tipping point. We expect Marx's *homo faber*, (wo)man as a creative producer, to finally be home in a 'room of her own.'

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[20] The metaphor of Indra's net expresses the inter-connectedness of things and human beings.