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# From the Ancient World to the Enlightenment (1)

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The idea of “society” is a modern one. Its development has accompanied the emergence of bourgeois polities characterized by representative democracy and social-class stratification. Although the origins of the term “society” can be traced back to the sixteenth century and even to its Greek and Latin roots, society as an objectified, abstract entity is a relatively recent invention. Before the nineteenth century, reference was made to categories of humans within specific populations, but not to the totality of groups and categories as a thing in itself. The reason for this lack of objectivization of the collectivity was rooted in the nature of pre-industrial societies. The hierarchical systems of antiquity and the feudal era, founded upon slavery or the servitude of subordinate castes, could not tolerate any imagined amalgamation of elites and the oppressed. For this reason, strict divisions were maintained in language as much as in reality; the idea of society (or social collectivity) was inconceivable because it had no functional role to play and was potentially threatening to existing institutions and culture. In both slave owning and feudal-contractual systems, transgressions of social boundaries were deadly subversive (and, in fact, scarcely imaginable) and it was not until the bourgeois revolutions made social consensus and national unity ideologically necessary that the idea of “society” gained acceptance.

The first point to make in this regard is that no concept of society existed as such in the writings of pre-industrial thinkers. In the work of Plato and Aristotle, for example, focus is upon the political organization that now we call the State. As Greek communities were relatively small, and divided into free citizens of the polis and slaves, the primary distinction was between individuals and families (or “households”), on the one hand, and the *polis* (the State) on the other hand. Although the rudiments of social-class and status stratification existed in ancient Greece, the productive system impeded the development of the large, impersonal divisions that characterize modern capitalist societies. Most importantly, the dependence upon slave labor meant that the distinction between free and unfree persons dominated social perceptions.

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The absence of a notion of society in classical Greek political thought persisted in spite of Aristotle's elaboration of a notion of social “association” (*oikos*); for it is a conception referring to personal and paternal relationships which are extended to the political coordination called the *polis*. As in ancient Roman culture, where the word *socius* referred to social relationships and not to the totality of such relationships, it was “community” that was evoked and not “society” in the modern sense. It can be said that no distinction existed between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) at this time. Whenever social associations were referred to, they were understood as personal, family or clan relationships and not as “simple associations” of the modern, impersonal type conceptualized as societal ( *Gesellschaft*). There was no conception of social “atomization” such as dominates social thought at the present time.

From the primitive democracies of tribal social organization (what Lewis Henry Morgan and Friedrich Engels would call “savagery,” passing through “barbarity”), therefore, ancient civilizations erected caste barriers of the strictest sort. The maintenance of these caste barriers dominated social mentality until the disintegration of the Roman Empire. In the transition to feudal society, the political authority and ideological mediation of an ecclesiastical Christian hierarchy represented the formation of a new type of caste stratification. The feudal period, ideologically based upon the belief in qualitative differences of virtually racial importance between social “orders,” was therefore equally resistant to any notion of social collectivity. It is important to note the distinction between ideas of political or spiritual membership in a community and the idea of society. If, in both Greek and Roman civilizations, an idea of citizenship ideally united all non slaves, and in feudal Christendom all Christians were supposedly equal before God, such identifications were all the more compelling because of the absence of any notion of social collectivity. The difference between social thought and mentality during these previous periods and that of the contemporary, industrial-capitalist era is that, since the nineteenth century, collective designations and identifications such as the State, Nation, ethnicity and religion can be countered by reference to social and economic conditioning, social-class conflict and struggle and other elements of historical analysis.

As stated above, the beginnings of secular social analysis can be clearly seen in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and others who sought to explain the social and political convulsion of the English social revolution in more empirical and materialistic terms. Hobbes is important because he conceives of society as a totality in which individuals were only a part and of which social elites are imposed from without in reaction to the natural tendencies of the collectivity. Society was a kind of molecular mass in a state of perpetual motion. The force animating society was energy provided by human nature: egoistic individualism caused each and every individual to attempt to maximize his or her own wellbeing at the expense of all others. Political order is imposed by the strongest individuals in the form of a State regulating the rapaciousness of all through its protection of freely engaged contracts. Inequalities in society arise through the efforts of those possessing the qualities most necessary for survival — talent, strength of character, intelligence.

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What Hobbes had done was substitute a notion of human nature as social force for the spiritual explanations of human behavior and change that had heretofore dominated social thought. It was an important step towards an idea of society because it posed the question of the nature of social existence and collectivity in purely secular terms. The question was now: what is human nature? Hobbes' arbitrary definition of it was immediately unsatisfactory to other thinkers. Although his formulation had the virtue of justifying the overthrown of the monarchy and feudal institutions judged incompatible with natural talents and free contracts, the idea that society was composed of individuals engaged in incessant war with each other was inimical to the social stability needed by the financial elites who had consolidated their control over England by 1688 (in the “Glorious Revolution”). It is at this point that John Locke provided another element of modern social thought.

Locke rejected Hobbes' idea that human nature was irrevocably egoistic. He could not accept Hobbes' conception that social and political life will always be insecure and disrupted continually by selfish “passions”. On the contrary, Locke asserted that such aggressive and selfish impulses were learned behavior and, consequently, could be overcome or at least moderated through proper education. Human beings were reasonable, and human society could become more and more secure through the judicious application of reason. There was, thus, no necessity to determine the foundations of human nature. The existing social environment conditioned human behavior and mentality. To improve one, the other must be improved. The means of improvement was action in the form of political organisation informed by intelligent deduction — reason.

Locke justified existing social divisions as much as Hobbes, but he did so on the basis of a theory of social action and not by the invocation of human nature. The politically powerful and possessing classes of society were powerful and in possession of the society's resources because they had rationally acquired their wealth and authority. But the political dominance of the possessing classes was naturally moderated by a sense of social responsibility, itself a rational apprehension of the need for social stability. Inequalities therefore were salutary in the sense that they permitted governance by those most apt to govern. Locke's theory is clearly an early formulation of liberal political theory. It justifies the social divisions and political institutions of capitalist representative democracy, ignoring class conflicts and exploitation.

The essential premises of Locke's notion of society as a mutually reinforcing entity given stability by contractual relationships were developed in a more critical way by the thinkers of the French Enlightenment.

Because the idea of society requires the objectification of a collectivity of individuals and groups, the efforts of the French *philosophes* of the eighteenth century to indirectly criticize the feudal social elites and the absolutist monarchy encouraged a tendency to comparatively refer to the “society” or to “societies”. It was claimed that no criticism of any social “system” was ever intended, only the dispassionate analysis of different customs, sets of laws and modes of behavior. But this claim was a politically inspired subterfuge. The very act of positing some objective standpoint for social analysis was subversive of existing political institutions, and the situation provided part of the motivation for thinkers like Montesquieu and Voltaire.

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Montesquieu explained political behavior in terms of geographical location and other existential conditions. He said flatly, in the *Spirit of the Laws*, that “Mankind are influenced by various causes: by the climate, by the religion, by the laws, by the maxims of government, by precedents, ordeals, and custom; which is formed a general spirit of nations.” The laws are the “fixed and invariable relations” which govern the actions of what exists. Society is the result or the product of these relations. Voltaire applied this perspective to historical analysis, most notably in his biography of Louis XIV. The effect of their analyses was to demystify existing social relations and political institutions by suggesting an idea of *objectivity* in the discussion of power and privilege. The positing of a supposedly value-neutral set of analytical criteria allowed a notion of relativity to permeate the discussion of social and political behavior. The *Ancien régime* could be implicitly criticized by simply juxtaposing its characteristics with those of some different society (as Montesquieu clearly did in his Persian Letters and as Voltaire did in his *Philosophical Dictionary*).

As conditions worsened and critics grew bolder, the idea of society was used in a more prescriptive way. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is particularly important in the evolution of the idea of society; he provided the bases for contemporary social science by reflecting openly on the evolution of social relations, denouncing the injustices inherent in feudal society and theorizing the mechanisms of an ideal community. His discussion of the “origins of inequality among men” was explicit in its criticism of prevailing social relations and the existing society. Of the two kinds of inequality – natural and artificial – the *Ancien régime* represented the domination of artificial inequality (inherited wealth and position, social status, political influence) over natural inequality (talent, merit, intelligence). The existing society was thusly based upon the containment, even repression of natural inequalities. In addition to the injustice engendered by what Rousseau described as a kind of endemic social violence, this society was characterized by frustration, inefficiency and hypocrisy.

Rousseau explained why such a situation could not endure in his *Le Contrat social*. All human society, he said, is founded upon an unspoken agreement to limit individual desires in the interest of the whole; this is the “social contract”. Government is thus the expression of a “general will” to abide by collectively decided upon rules and regulations enforced by political institutions administrated by individuals delegated the authority necessary for effective governance. But if this governance is no longer in the interest of the society as a whole, then the social contract is broken and new arrangements must be created. In this way, Rousseau provided a ready justification for political revolt; but in doing so he abstracted social relationships and even social groups to the point that it was upon an idea of the social collectivity that his political theory depended. In the thought of Rousseau the idea of society not only existed, it was the most essential premise.

The importance of Rousseau's vision of existing society, seen and described clearly as a totality, was also that it placed social relations within a progressive evolutionary context. Not only did society evolve, it must evolve because of its limitations. “Man is born free,” he said, “but everywhere he is in chains.” Only by concerted political action could the situation be redressed. It is at this point, in his appropriation of the idea of contract, that Rousseau provided a rationale for revolutionary action designed to consciously transform society into a more just and efficient system of social relations and political institutions. Rousseau's conception of society and its dysfunctions was an objectification that contributed to the emergence of contemporary social science, but it was equally a political indictment of social oppression that directly inspired utopian theorists and, ultimately, Karl Marx.

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It was at this point that the existence of “society” was taken for granted and creative social thought began to focus upon how society *could be* if governed by “natural laws”. A whole new debate was thereby initiated. As Montesquieu had suggested, if the operative mechanisms governing social processes could be identified and conformed to, a more functional, harmonious and equitable society would result.

But what were these natural laws? In his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith maintained that near total freedom of

 

individual action would allow the mechanisms of economic supply and demand to regulate and balance human interaction on all levels. This was the “invisible hand”. Like Rousseau, he believed that eliminating the artificial constraints on human effort and initiative would liberate society. The difference between their conceptions was that Smith was far more concrete in his description of what society is. According to him, society was essentially a complex of productive and market relations in whom individuals attempted to maximize their own wellbeing. Smith thus saw society as a collectivity of individuals in which capitalist social relations were primordial. Like Hobbes, Smith believed human nature to be basically egoistic. The difference was that this egoism was the potential basis of social harmony. If only governments would limit their interference in social affairs, production would be maximized and economic prosperity would bring social harmony. What Smith had done was provide an economic rationale for the contractual relationships theorized by John Locke.

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Although Adam Smith's vision of industrial-capitalist society provided inspiration to generations of capitalist economists and ideologists, and contributed to Marx's understanding of capitalist political economy, it was a vision not shared by other utopian social thinkers. The most important of these were Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon writing during the early post-Napoleonic period of the nineteenth century. Their work also began with the idea of a society that required fundamental reorganization, but their responses to the situation were extremely different.

Fourier countered the idea of egoistic self-interest that had been posited by Hobbes, was theorized more completely by Adam Smith and which had become dogma in the writings of bourgeois economists. Because human beings are naturally drawn together by their “passions,” society is basically an associative entity for Fourier. All that society lacks is effective organization for it to become politically stable and socially harmonious, organization proposed by Fourier in the elaboration of his plans for organized communities he called “phalansteries”. For Henri de Saint-Simon the problem was also of organization, but related more specifically to governance. For him, political authority and social policy must be delegated to the individuals best able to govern thanks to their technical training and competence.

All such utopian schemes took as their point of departure the same vision of a class-ridden, bourgeois society of which the main characteristics were social misery and economic exploitation. This type of theorization, an obvious extension of the “enlightened” ideas of the eighteenth century, continued far into the nineteenth, representing a will to transcend the disorganization and conflict endemic in capitalist society.

It was increasingly clear, however, that social change required some more effective mode of action than simple appeals to reason and good will. It was Karl Marx who eventually provided an explanation of social evolution combining analysis, critique and a theory of revolutionary change. His development of the idea of class struggle as the “motor” of change in capitalist society (and throughout all human history) built upon previous speculations and provided a foundation for social analysis and political action that continues to inspire both thought and practice. Marx’s understanding of society became essential to all opponents of capitalist social relations, regardless of differing doctrinal persuasions.