

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH: A CONTRIBUTION OF WALTER BAGEHOT TO POLITICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Walter Bagehot attempted to solve the problem concerned of assuming the truth of the doctrine of natural selection, and how to account for the momentous transition from the brute level of the struggle for existence to a human level of social organization and cooperation. To Bagehot this problem was the essential one and the key to all subsequent development of the human race. In answering his problem Bagehot brings to light the role played by the irrational and sub-rational forces of human nature inherited from the countless ages of revolutionary process.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness, Discussion, Empirical, Instinct, Progress, Transmission

INTRODUCTION

During the earlier part of the 19th century, the social phenomena was sought to be understood biologically. Spencer was the leading thinker of the biological school of thought. But the application of biology to social sciences is confused as society is a mental structure. State and its institutions are the product of mind and they must be interpreted in terms of mind. This attempt to understand political behavior of man in terms of the working of mind was made towards the later part of the nineteenth century by thinkers like Walter Bagehot, Graham Wallas and McDougall. These thinkers put emphasis on mind and not on matter. They emphasized the role of instincts, impulses, customs and traditions in the determination of human behavior. Their psychological approach has been very useful in understanding many of the social and political problems and in finding their solutions.

Psychology had not been completely ignored in the past. Aristotle had taken a particular view of man's nature. He interpreted man as a rational creature who is moved to action by reason. Plato's conception of the philosopher king is the logical view of the assumption about the nature of man. Thereafter, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau and Machiavelli rest upon different conceptions about the nature of man. Bentham and J.S. Mill were of the view that man is thoroughly rational and his action is guided by conscious pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. But inspire of that no proper study of the psychological aspect of man was conducted. This was mainly done by the thinkers of modern political school of thought. According to the modern school of thought now a days, the human mind and human personality have become complex. There are many factors which influence the behavior of man. So all the factors should be studied regarding the nature of man.

There is an emotional element in reasoning and there is a rational element in emotions. Reasons and emotions act together. This realization challenged the political theory which was based on the autonomy of reason. As Graham Wallas said, "Politics is only in a slight degree the product of conscious reason; it is largely a matter of sub-conscious process of habit and instinct, suggestion and imitation. Man is a creature compact of emotions, impulses and instincts, as well as the

conscious reason". The most important change brought about by the psychologists has to force the political thinkers to analyze political institutions in terms of actual practice and behavior of people. Since their times political thought has become more empirical and scientific. According to the contemporary psychologists, the human mind is not passive. The environment itself changes according to the interpretation which the mind makes.

Walter Bagehot is the leader of psychological school of thought in England. His work 'Physics and Politics' changed the political theorists into social psychologists. They have approached the facts of group life on the assumption that these facts are facts of group consciousness and can be described and explained by the method which a natural science uses in order to describe and explain the facts of matter. His book was really the beginning of the psychological method. According to Prof. Hearnshaw, "Physics and Politics is a sociological footnote to the doctrine of evolution prevailing in the sixties". Bagehot has been rightly called a pioneer in the field of psychological approach. According to Bagehot, social development is made possible by the development of the individual. The development of the individual is due to the fact that the mind in some strange way store up the consequences and somehow the result, as a rule and commonly enough, goes down to our descendents. In other words, society grows because individual grows and the individual grows because his experiences that are somehow stored up in the nervous tissues of the brain are passed on to the offsprings by heredity. He was of the view that acquired characters are transmissible.

Progress is made possible because of the capacity of the individuals to acquire through conscious efforts. By such efforts they acquire certain qualities which they do not possess before and then transmit them to their offspring. The formula of progress is Effort, Conservation and Transmission. As regards the nature of the heritage which a generation receives from the preceding generation it is partly physical and partly psychological. The physical part consists of the reflexes which have become ingrained in the nervous tissues – our actions, impulses and instincts. The psychological part consists of the customs and traditions in the midst of which we grow and which shape our actions. He regarded tradition or the cake of custom as he called it, the principal factor in the making of modern nations.

In the process of social development, Bagehot has marked out three stages – the stage of no polity, the stage of fixed polity and the stage of flexible polity. These three stages may also be given the name of preliminary age, military age and the age of discussion. In the preliminary age there was no polity or organization. People lived the life of a brute, the life which Hobbes portrayed for the man in the stage of nature. In this age there were no traditions or knowledge. There was a keen struggle for existence but soon the people came to realize that in the struggle for existence, "an aggregate of families owing to have even a slippery allegiance to a single head would be sure to have the better of a set of families acknowledging to obedience to anyone, but scattering loose about the world and fighting where they stood. "This realization led to the development of cooperative bond. Bagehot writes: 'Unless can make a strong cooperative bond, your society will be conquered and killed out by some other society which has such a bond.'" In this way the second stage in the process of social development is reached in which group solidarity enforced through group customs. These customs bring out conformity on the part of individuals to the needs of society and tend to make it strong. During this stage customs dominated the life of people. Obedience to them was strictly enforced and made obligatory. There was absolutely no scope for any dissent. There was no freedom of thought. Imitation was the order of the day and complete obedience was demanded of every member of the group. In this stage the obedience to the customs was strictly enforced and made obligatory. It was a stage of fixed polity.

Bagehot lays great emphasis on the role of unconscious imitation. He writes, "The truth is that the propensity of man to imitate what is before him is one of the strongest parts of his nature. We must not think that this imitation is voluntary or even conscious. On the contrary, it has its seats mainly in very obscure parts of the mind, whose notions, so far from having been consciously produced, are hardly felt to exist." It is this unconscious tendency to imitate that helps in creating the cake of customs and making it powerful. Bagehot's contention is that a vast majority of our actions are based upon this habit of unconscious imitation and not upon conscious reasoning. If the society is to make any progress, the cake of custom must be broken but it is not easy to do so. Only discussion can breakdown such barriers. Once discussion entered into the custom ridden society, it made the people question the utility of customs and made possible the spread of new ideas. The people became quite and conscious in their actions. The stage of fixed polity gave place to the stage of flexible polity thus bringing in progress and new ideas. According to Bagehot "Only those societies can make progress which have broken the customs and entered into the age of discussion. Only discussion can substitute the scope for government by discussion in place of the government by despotism. Hence it can introduce the element of liberalism in the political fabric of society. It can modify human nature and teach them to think before they leap".

Bagehot is famous not only for his psychological approach to the study of social and political phenomena but is also known for introducing a new approach to the interpretation of the English political institutions. In this field his contribution can be found in his another great work 'The English Constitution'. Prior to Bagehot, constitutions were deemed only as legal structures. He traces the successful working of the British constitution not to the legal framework it provides but to the character of English men. According to Prof. Dicey, "Bagehot has brought more knowledge of life and originality of mind to the elucidation of the theory and practice of English politics than any other man since Burke".

Recent psychological school has upset the traditional political thought which rested on the Aristotlian assumption that, man is a rational being. The new developments have drawn the attention of political thinkers to the actual working of human mind. The labours of writers like Graham Wallas, McDougall, Bagehot, Durkheim and Ross have given us insight into the many forces which work on human mind and influence social relationships. They have thrown light on the importance of instinct and impulse, custom and tradition in our political behavior and laid emphasis on the need of their study. To deal with mankind in groups as if each human being is a pure intelligence introduced by emotion is a great error. The ways in which the politicians influence the electorate stand exposed today. The way in which society exercises control over its members is much different from the way in which the state enforces obedience upon its members. This knowledge of social control can certainly be very helpful to the government. The knowledge of psychology provides us the data on the basis of which we can decide about legislation. The role of public opinion and propaganda has been highlighted. The psychologists have taught us that political and social problems is the product of political and social sickness.

CONCLUSIONS

All modern psychologists have come to regard the human mind and human personality as much more complex than the older view. They have brought to light the part that the unconscious elements play in determining the man's actions. They also emphasized the idea of the unity of mind. The most important change brought about by the psychologists has to force the political thinkers to analyze political institutions in terms of actual practice and behavior of people. Since their times, political thought has become empirical and scientific. It attempts to discuss the actual political phenomena, to analyze them and draw lessons from them. Bagehot occupies a prominent place in English political thought.

He was a highly suggestive writer. His emphasis on the role of unconscious imitation and discussion led subsequent writers to carry further his approach and add more to what he said. He has exercised an abiding influence as a political psychologist and made a valuable beginning towards the psychological approach to the problems of politics. He had a versatile and a prolific mind that had the capacity of presenting old subjects into a new light. His treatment of the psychological factors in political behavior was the most penetrating of his time and may be said to have inaugurated the modern psychological school of political thought.

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