Social cycle theory

Social cycle theories are among the earliest social theories in sociology. Unlike the theory of social evolutionism, which views the evolution of society and human history as progressing in some new, unique direction(s), sociological cycle theory argues that events and stages of society and history are generally repeating themselves in cycles. Such a theory does not necessarily imply that there cannot be any social progress. In the early theory of Ssu-Ma Ch‘ien and the more recent theories of long-term ("secular") political-demographic cycles (e.g. Korotayev, Malkov, Khaltourina 2006[1]) as well as in the Varnic theory of P.R. Sarkar an explicit accounting is made of social progress.

Predecessors

Interpretation of history as repeating cycles of Dark and Golden Ages was a common belief among ancient cultures. Giorgio de Santillana, the former professor of the history of science at MIT, taught that over thirty ancient cultures held this view and associated the changing of the ages to the precession of the equinoxes. It was the dominant world belief prior to the Darwinian era which requires a linear viewpoint and discounts any mention of a long ago Golden Age.[citation needed]

The more limited cyclical view of history defined as repeating cycles of events was put forward in the academic world in the 19th century in historiosophy (a branch of historiography) and is a concept that falls under the category of sociology. However, Polybius, Ibn Khaldun (see Asabiyyah), and Giambattista Vico can be seen as precursors of this analysis. The Saeculum was identified in Roman times. In recent times, P. R. Sarkar in his Social Cycle Theory has used this idea to elaborate his interpretation of history.

Classical theories

Among the prominent historiosophers, Russian philosopher Nikolai Danilewski (1822-1885) is important. In Rossiia i Europa (1869) he differentiated between various smaller civilizations (Egyptian, Chinese, Persian, Greek, Roman, German, and Slav, among others). He wrote that each civilization has a life cycle, and by the end of the 19th century the Roman-German civilization was in decline, while the Slav civilization was approaching its Golden Age. A similar theory was put forward by Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) who in his Der Untergang des Abendlandes (1918) also expected that the Western civilization was about to collapse.

The first social cycle theory in sociology was created by Italian sociologist and economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) in his Trattato di Sociologia Generale (1916). He centered his theory on the concept of an elite social class, which he divided into cunning 'foxes' and violent 'lions'. In his view of society, the power constantly passes from the 'foxes' to the 'lions' and vice versa.

Sociological cycle theory was also developed by Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889-1968) in his Social and Cultural Dynamics (1937, 1943). He classified societies according to their 'cultural mentality', which can be ideational (reality is spiritual), sensate (reality is...
material), or idealistic (a synthesis of the two). He interpreted the contemporary West as a sensate civilization dedicated to technological progress and prophesied its fall into decadence and the emergence of a new ideational or idealistic era.

**Modern theories**

One of the most important recent findings in the study of the long-term dynamic social processes was the discovery of the political-demographic cycles as a basic feature of the dynamics of complex agrarian systems.

The presence of political-demographic cycles in the pre-modern history of Europe and China, and in chiefdom level societies worldwide has been known for quite a long time (e.g., Postan 1950, 1973; Sahlins 1963; Abel 1974, 1980; Ladurie 1974; Hodder 1978; Braudel 1973; Chao 1986; H. T. Wright 1984; Cameron 1989; Goldstone 1991; Kul’pin 1990; Anderson 1994; Mugruzin 1986, 1994 etc.), and already in the 1980s more or less developed mathematical models of demographic cycles started to be produced (first of all for Chinese "dynastic cycles") (Usher 1989). At the moment we have a very considerable number of such models (Chu and Lee 1994; Nefedov 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004; S. Malkov, Kovalev, and A. Malkov 2000; S. Malkov and A. Malkov 2000; Malkov and Sergeev 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Malkov et al. 2002; Malkov 2002, 2003, 2004; Turchin 2003, 2005a; Korotayev et al. 2006).

Recently the most important contributions to the development of the mathematical models of long-term ("secular") sociodemographic cycles have been made by Sergey Nefedov, Peter Turchin, Andrey Korotayev, and Sergey Malkov. What is important is that on the basis of their models Nefedov, Turchin and Malkov have managed to demonstrate that sociodemographic cycles were a basic feature of complex agrarian systems (and not a specifically Chinese or European phenomenon).

The basic logic of these models is as follows:

- After the population reaches the ceiling of the carrying capacity of land, its growth rate declines toward near-zero values.

- The system experiences significant stress with decline in the living standards of the common population, increasing the severity of famines, growing rebellions etc.

- As has been shown by Nefedov, most complex agrarian systems had considerable reserves for stability, however, within 50–150 years these reserves were usually exhausted and the system experienced a demographic collapse (a Malthusian catastrophe), when increasingly severe famines, epidemics, increasing internal warfare and other disasters led to a considerable decline of population.

- As a result of this collapse, free resources became available, per capita production and consumption considerably increased, the population growth resumed and a new sociodemographic cycle started.
It has become possible to model these dynamics mathematically in a rather effective way. Note that the modern theories of political-demographic cycles do not deny the presence of trend dynamics and attempt at the study of the interaction between cyclical and trend components of historical dynamics.

Modern social scientists from different fields have introduced cycle theories to predict civilizational collapses in approaches that apply contemporary methods that update the approach of Spengler, such as the work of Joseph Tainter suggesting a civilizational life-cycle. In more micro-studies that follow the work of Malthus, scholars such as David Lempert have presented "alpha-helix" models of population, economics, and political response, including violence, in cyclical forms that add aspects of culture change into the model. Lempert has also modeled political violence in Russian society, suggesting that theories attributing violence in Russia to ideologies are less useful than cyclical models of population and economic productivity.

In Sarkar's Law of Social Cycle social progress is defined in terms of a new vision of human progress by placing an emphasis on human spiritual development. Integrated with that is Sarkar's theory of four basic ages of warriors, intellectuals and acquisitors, and a brief age of labourers. During such ages humanity has faced an eternal struggle with each epoch deteriorating into a harmful exploitative phase.

Sarkar devises an exit strategy from such a development, based on the role of enlightened moralists, the Sad-Vipras. It is their role, based on self-less virtues and ideation on the divine, to apply energy and accelerate social momentum when the evolutionary process is caught up in social stasis. If this is not done, the ruling class, after having abandoned its original virtues, by placing an intense focus on its own social agenda begins to inflict tremendous and unjustified misery on other sections of society. The downfall of Soviet Communism in 1990[1], the Great Depression of the 1930s[2] and the crisis of present day Capitalism[3] are manifestations of such social stasis.

See also

- List of cycles

References


Further reading


• Tainter, Joseph, The Collapse of Complex Civilizations.


