

Department of  
sociology.

Semester-II Soc C.C 203

Prepared by—|

Dr Tapashi



Bhattacharjee

**CYCLICAL THEORY OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE.**

## **A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Vilfredo Pareto was born in Paris in 1848. His mother was French while his father was an Italian nobleman. Pareto's family had been active in Italian politics and had to live in exile for a while because of his father's support for an independent and united Italian republic. In the late 1850s, the family could return to Italy. He received a degree in mathematics and physics and enrolled himself in the School of Engineering in 1867. He even served a railroad company in Rome as a consulting engineer. However, he left the job shortly and

returned to Florence and even contested for the Italian parliament in 1881. As a strong proponent of free market trade, he campaigned hard but lost the election.

Vilfredo Federico Damaso Pareto, the distinguished Italian sociologist, was influential during in the American sociological circle in his time, especially the 1930s. As the leading proponent of functional sociology in the USA, Talcott Parsons took a lot of interest in his works. Pareto's sociology subsequently has lost the importance, while only his theory of elites and circulation of elites has retained its relevance in contemporary thinking on society. Primarily, his sociological theories were formulated in reaction to Marx's social theory. He not only refuted Marx, but along with that he also questioned the very foundation of the Enlightenment philosophy. He critiqued the rationality principle of the Enlightenment and contended that human society is as much a result of non-rational factors such as human instincts. Nevertheless, he insisted on the logico-experimental method, thereby holding the scientific nature of sociology aloft.



**Pareto's Theory of Social Change or Cyclic Theory of Social Change**—The theory of cyclic social change as propounded by Pareto, is an important contribution to the field of sociology. In this theory, he has made an attempt to interpret concretely the social phenomenon. According to Pareto, the two classes of residues—'residues of combinations' and 'residues of persistence of aggregate' are responsible for social change.

According to Pareto, 3 factors are responsible for social change : (a) Political, (b) Economical, and (c) Ideological.

The cycle of social changes goes on. The political cycle starts when those who have strong residues of the persistence of aggregate hold power over the government. They try to rule over the society with the help of force which has its own repercussions. Because of this use of force, the reaction takes place amongst the people of the lower class and they overthrow the die-heards for 'lions of the elite'.

In the economic field, according to Pareto again there are two types of persons who possess strongly 'residues of combinations' or speculators while those who possess 'residues of persistence aggregate' are called 'Rentiers'. Rentiers are die-heards and they are not prepared to change with the requirements of the society. Once



in the economic field, the rentiers grow powerful and control the economic machinery. Those who belong to the non-elite class with these residues become powerful. The speculators resort to a sort of corruption and mechanisation. This leads to the decline and the rentiers supersede them. Similarly, in the ideological field or intellectual field, once there is predominance of the die-hard, those opposed to it become powerful and they try to bring in social change.

According to Pareto, the cycle of the social change continues to move constantly. This cyclical theory of social change is an important contribution to sociology and the field of social thought. This theory of social change is based on his 'theory of residues'. According to Pareto, as we have already seen those possessing with 'residues of combination' are foxes, that is cunning and sly. On the other hand, those possessing 'residues of persistence of aggregate' are 'lions'. Once the foxes predominate the lions oppose them. But when the lions predominate they become rigid and foxes replace them. This is like elite moving into non-elite and non-elite moving up into elite. Don Martindale in his book 'Types of Sociological Theory' described it in the following words :

"All the devices of aristocracy to maintain opposition including the elevation of dangerous dealers from the lower to the upper classes, the use of bribes, corruption, imprisonment and extermination, will not prevail in the long run."

Pareto's cyclic theory of social change is linked with his 'theory of circulation of elite'. These theories work in almost all the types of political system, in all fields say political economical and intellectual etc.

According to Pareto, the cycle of social change is helpful in maintaining balance. Crisis, according to Pareto, is a part of every political and economic set-up and it leads to social change.

Pareto's elite theory and his conceptualization of 'circulation of elites' constitute his major contribution to sociology. Elites are individuals of highest performance in their respective fields. There are two main strata in any human society: the elite and the non-elite. Additionally, there are two principal classes of elites: the governing elite and the non-governing elite. Governing elite consists of individuals who directly or indirectly play an important role in the manipulation of political power. On the other hand, the non-governing elite consist of capable men not in power positions. The governing elite

comprises of people who actually rule but are always in a precarious position. The elite rule is characterized by a state of slow and continuous transformation. Pareto explains such social change through the concept of 'circulation of elites'.



**Social Stratification and Elite**—According to Pareto, human behaviour is guided by residues and on the basis of these residues, he has divided society into different groups. For him 'society is divided once and for all into two classes'. According to Pareto, like the human differences in every social set-up, the members of every social group may be divided into two categories : (1) Elite, and (2) Non-elite.

(1) **Elite**—The difference between elite and non-elite is based on physical, psychological and moral characteristics. Elite as we all know belong to the higher classes and they control political, economic and social set-up. They represent the dominant class or the class that yields power and controls political set-up. Members of this group are intelligent, efficient and possess moral qualities. On the other hand, members of non-elite do not possess such qualities. According to Parsons :

"For this purpose, however, he (Pareto) goes no further than to correlate excess mass in any particular respect. They always constitute a relatively small minority."

According to Pareto, the class of elite could be further divided into sub-classes :

(a) Who directly or indirectly carry out the functions of the government and influence the administration. Pareto has called it 'Governing Elite'.

(b) On the other hand, the second sub-class of the elite class is of those who do not directly take part in the government but who have a higher status on account of their qualities. Literateurs, artists, great industrialists, scientists etc. belong to this class.

(2) **Non-Elite**—Those persons who do not possess high physical, mental, moral and intellectual qualities, belong to the 'non-elite' class. They are the lower class of the society.

**Dynamic Nature of the Elite Class**—According to Pareto, members of the elite possess certain qualities and it is on the basis of these qualities that members of the society belong to this class. Once they lose these qualities, they go down to the class of non-elite. In fact, there is up and down circulation of the elites. It means that members of the non-elite may go up to the class of elite while the members of the elite may go down to the class of non-elite. This shifting does take place but there is no uniform rule about it. The speed is also not uniform. The circulation of elite also differs from time to time. It also changes according to circumstances. This is a



social phenomenon that families of the lower class replace the elite while members of the elite fill the vacancies of lower class. There are various forces and factors that are responsible for it.

**Characteristics of Elite or Circulation of Elite**—The main characteristics of the social class called 'elite' is its capacity to prove superior to others. According to Pareto, this class of Elite is the main class of the society. Bogardus has described it in the following terms :

“The theory of elite is that in every society there are people who possess in a marked degree, the qualities of intelligence, character, skill, capacity, whatever kind, that there are two classes of elite, that the two groups are disjunctive at any given time, that there is an up and down circulation of elite.”

Generally, the members of elite check the influence of the members of the non-elite in that class. Various measures are adopted for it. Sometimes penal offences are also formed against those who try to enter the class of elite. In India, the attempt of sudras to enter into the class of non-sudras is a case of example. Amongst elite there may be quite strict people but on the other hand, there may be liberal members of the elite as well. Those who are liberal, are respected by the members of the non-elite.

Circulation or upward and downward circulation amongst the members of the elite and non-elite is a typical characteristics of the elite.

**Critical Evaluation of Pareto's Theory of Elite and Cyclical Social Change**—Pareto's theory of elite is another form of the division of society into different classes. Society has always been divided into two classes—one who possesses power and the other who do not. Pareto belonged to the class who possesses power, economic



force and the other things. His theory of 'circulation of elite' is a realistic realisation of the social change and transmigration of one class into the other. But his theory suffers from the following drawbacks :

(1) The distinction that he has made, between the two forces of social change is not clear.

(2) His concept of residues and their part in the social change is not clearly defined.

In spite of these drawbacks, his theory of cyclic social change and 'circulation of elite' is a very important contribution to the field of sociology.

“Cyclical theories of social change focus on the rise and fall of civilisations attempting to discover and account for these patterns of growth and decay” – (Ian Robertson). *Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin* can be regarded as the Champions of this theory. Their ideas may be briefed here.



Oswald Spengler, a German school teacher, in his book "*The Decline of the West*"—1918, pointed out that the fate of civilisations was a matter of "*destiny*". Each civilisation is like a biological organism and has a similar life-cycle; birth, maturity, old age and death. After making a study of eight major civilisations, including the West, he said that the modern Western Society is in the last stage. *i.e.* old age. He concluded that the Western Societies were entering a period of decay – as evidenced by wars, conflicts, and social breakdown that heralded their doom. This theory is almost out of fashion today. His idea of '*destiny*' is hardly an adequate explanation of social change. His biological analogy is also too unrealistic and his work is too mystical and speculative.

### (b) Toynbee: 'Challenge and Response'

Arnold Toynbee, a British historian with enough sociological insight has offered a somewhat more promising a theory of social change. His famous book "*A Study of History*"—1946, a multivolume work, draws on materials from 24 civilisations. The key-concepts in Toynbee's theory are those of "*challenge and response*". "Every society faces challenges—at first, challenges posed by the environment; later challenges from internal and external enemies. The nature of the responses determines the society's fate. The achievements of a civilisation consist of its successful responses to challenges; if it cannot mount an effective response, it dies".—(Jan Robertson).

Toynbee's views are more optimistic than those of Spengler's, for he does not believe that all civilisations will inevitably decay. He has pointed out that history is a series of cycles of decay and growth. But each new civilisation is able to learn from the mistakes and to borrow from cultures of others. It is, therefore, possible for each new cycle to offer higher levels of achievement. Still he has not explained *why* some societies are able to offer effective responses to their challenges while others do not, or *why* a society should overcome one challenge but become a victim of another.

### (c) Sorokin: 'Sensate' and 'Ideational' Culture

The Russian-American sociologist, Pitirim A Sorokin, in his book "*Social and Culture Dynamics*"—1938, has offered another explanation of social change. His work has had a more lasting impact on sociological thinking. Instead of viewing civilisations into terms of development and decline he proposed that they alternate or fluctuate between two cultural extremes: The "*sensate*" and the "*ideational*". The *sensate culture* stresses those things which can be perceived directly by the senses. It is practical, hedonistic, sensual, and materialistic. *Ideational Culture* emphasises those things which can be perceived only by the mind. It is abstract, religious, concerned with faith and ultimate truth. It is the opposite of the sensate culture. Both represent '*pure*' types of culture. Hence no society ever fully conforms to either type. Without mentioning the causes, he said that as the culture of a society develops towards one pure type, it is countered by the opposing cultural force. Cultural development is then reversed moving towards the opposite type of culture. In brief, too much emphasis on one type of culture leads to a reaction towards the other. "Societies contain both these impulses in varying degrees and the tension between them creates long-term instability". Between these types, of course, there lies a third type '*ideastic*' culture. This is a happy and a desirable blend of the other two, but no society ever seems to have achieved it as a stable condition.

Sorokin's theory has not been accepted by the sociologists for it portrays his prejudices and probably his disgust with the modern society. His concepts of '*sensate*' and '*ideational*' are purely *subjective*. His theory is in a way *speculative* and *descriptive*. It does not provide an explanation as to why social change should take this form. Thus, the cyclical theories, in general are not satisfactory.



The process of social change, although it moves in an unscheduled direction is the result of fluctuations. According to Sorokin, the social change takes place as a result of change in culture. From Ideational stage, culture moves to Idealistic stage and then to Sensate stage and vice versa. In this respect also he has supported the theory of 'Integrated system'. He has himself remarked :

“These systems, in turn, build up into 'Super system', and these 'Super systems' still consistent within themselves are ultimately Sensate or Ideational.”

In every cultural system, there are certain elements and ways. Once they get connected in a logical and meaningful action, they direct the unity. On the basis of this unity that system is given a particular name. The types of culture according to Sorokin are

based on these traits and elements which continue to change. Beirstedt has correctly summed up in the following lines :

“If you strike a piano-key you, will get a sound, if you strike harder you will get a louder sound, but there is a limit to this process. There comes a time when you strike the key still harder, you get not a louder sound but a broken piano and it is with culture.”

**Criticism of the Sorokin's Theory of Social Change**—His theory of social change is original and brilliant to the field of sociology, but his critics have pointed out towards weaknesses which may be stated under the following heads :

(1) **Too much Conclusive**—Sorokin has propounded his theory in a very sure and conclusive manner bordering on hatred towards most of the other things, particularly gifts of scientific and technological developments. According to Sorokin, the modern gifts of science are Sensate in nature and he does not like them.

(2) **Artificial Principles**—The theory of social change according to which the culture moves from Ideational stage to Idealistic and then to Sensate, is not based on scientific factors. It has been characterised as artificial bias and based on darivations. Mere saying that something goes on because it is intrinsic for its growth, is not a sound principle.