

A Critical Enquiry into Two Approaches to Culture and History

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Abstract

Philosophies of culture¹ may be called social man's cogitation about himself on the one hand to understand his own nature and on the other to understand how far he has reached to realize it. Societies and cultures and plural. Generally speaking, culture may be called way of life of a society, which originates from a life-vision. Life vision separates one society from the other; it gives the society an identity and separates it from other societies. This is the basis of cultural pluralism. Cultures are plural because they are mutually different ways of life- different ways of life based on different visions of life.

In normal times, such cogitations-on the whence and whither the how and why, of a given society-are now and then carried on by a few thinkers or scholars. They assume all the more importance during times of crisis.

Introduction

Right from the very beginning of the twentieth century especially after the First World War till 1950s, the half century, being a period of possibly the greatest crisis in the whole history of mankind, produced a large number of philosophies of culture. Interestingly, some of these works either became bestsellers, like Spengler's Decline of the West, and many other like Kroeber's configurations of culture growth reached tens of hundreds of lay readers.

Concept

The conception of culture as an entity governed by its own principles is the hallmark of these philosophies of culture. These philosophies do not explain culture with reference to man, it is the other way round- the explain in man with reference to culture.

With the advent of the twentieth century culture began to be conceived as a supra- human entity or a whole governed by its own principles independent of the individual members of the society. The intellect, which once, was thought to be the creator of culture, was now largely seen as constituted by culture². The conception of culture as an entity having a being transcending human individual, found expression in a whole lot of totalitarian philosophies of culture. Spengler's philosophy is, if not the first, one of the first such philosophies. Though these philosophies proceed in diverse directions and are based on different presuppositions but one thing that is common to them all is their "determinism" Cultures thus

conceived, have life and logic of their own and men are born into and live under their tutelage, and they as the reigning deity determine the content and form of their being.

Here it may be added that Hegel and Marx, also view history in a similar fashion, Hegel saw Objective Spirit, realizing its essence- Freedom through history. Marx saw the play of objective forces -economics forces- carrying history on the high -way to the Classless- Society.

Spengler's theory of culture

In conceiving culture as an entity having a being its own independent of the members of the society, there is a lurking danger of man, as an individual being reduced to a mere puppet of a totalitarian culture concept. Spengler's theory of culture is one such extreme case. He conceives cultures as higher organisms, which live out a fixed life-span; their blooming and fading happen as prescribed by fate which no matter how hard we try, cannot be averted. These mighty life courses completely swallow up the being of the human individual and reduce him to a 'nothingness' a 'null'.

Kroeber 's theory of culture

Kroeber also views culture as an entity that transcends human individual. In spite of his being a votary of empiricism and scientific method he talked of cultures as 'wholes' and whose life- cycle could be described in terms of 'growth' 'realization' 'exhaustion' and 'death'. Being an anthropologist he describes culture as a system which bears in itself certain specific potentialities and also specific

limitations' which enable it, even compel it, barring catastrophe from outside, to realize or fulfill itself to the terminus of their potentialities of these potentialities, but not to go beyond them. When the given set of potentialities is exhausted the growth ends.... there is no further growth until a thoroughly new set of impulses has arisen under new circumstances.

Differences between the two theories

Spengler and Kroeber are poles apart as far as the fundamental presuppositions of their philosophy of culture are concerned. And yet they have so much in common that on many an occasion Kroeber inductively arrives at the conclusions, intuited by Spengler.

But the empiricist in him pulls Kroeber back. As Philip Bagby says Spengler, in spite of his wild exaggerations and his reliance on intuition did have a concept of culture which approaches the anthropological one. Like an anthropologist Spengler viewed culture as an integrated whole though of course Kroeber would certainly not view it as completely integrated as Spengler did.

Some anthropologist have held that any culture is necessarily integrated in all its parts; in other words, that the basic ideas and values are expressed in every one of the culture traits and complexes. Spengler appears to have held a similar view; his cultures are spiritual in nature (that is, our terms, consist of ideas and values) and form entirely independent entities, self determined and unaffected by the environment or by their contacts with each other. It seems likely, however, that these points of view are too radical and not in accord with the facts; very probably a culture may be more or less integrated at different times and under different circumstances as well as in its different divisions. It may be pointed out here that Spengler's approach to culture was radically different. His cultures are spiritual and could only be apprehended intuitively and the anthropologists, Kroeber included, hold that cultures are part of nature- expressed through human behavior- can only be apprehended empirically.

Approach to the concept of culture in India

In India, historians and the students of history have largely remained indifferent to this subject. They tend to follow the analytical, systematic approach. That is precisely the reason that

we are witness to the division of history into political history, social history, economic history and so on. Although these spheres apparently seem independent, the fact remains that all the spheres of human endeavor are organically connected to each others like the parts of boy. Even when a comprehensive history is written diverse spheres, social, political, economic etc. are treated independently of each other, without ever realizing that developments in one sphere not only impinge upon other spheres but also that they all tend to exhibit similar tendencies.

Work done in the field of culture in the West

In the West one comes across many such works. One cannot exclude such philosophers as Hegel, Marx and Engel's who too tried to conceive history holistically. Though their approaches were holistic but their picture of history was universal, they viewed history as one universal phenomenon, while the rest of the above mentioned thinkers viewed history as plural phenomenon.

These works fall broadly into two groups. One defines culture in terms of patterns and uniformities of the behavior of people (Philips Bagby, Kroeber, Sorokin etc.) and the second in terms of such values, ideals or concepts of which the humans are vehicles for their expression (Spengler, Toynbee, Cassirer, Ortega, Gasset etc.). The approach of the first category of thinkers is synchronic and their context is anthropological-sociological. The approach of the second category or thinkers is diachronic and context is historical. The later group view history as a process of realization of some ideals or value by society and they make such societies as their subject of study.

Conclusion

With the rise of "postmodernism" in Europe and America the paradigm shift has taken place instead of the Cartesian mechanistic world-view of Descartes and Newton. A holistic system world-view has been gaining ground in diverse fields of human cognition ranging from physics, medicine, chemistry of psychology; economics, history and other social sciences. According to Newtonian-Cartesian view, truth is absolute but according to the post modernist view, truth is contextual.

Spenglerian and Kroeberian approaches to history are holistic and systemic. In spite of such

great an influential systemic thinkers like Arnold Toynbee, Pitrim Sorokin, Albert Schweitzer, Alfred Northrop etc. and of course Spengler and Kroeber, the predominant approach to history has remained mechanistic, systematic an analytical instead of holistic systematic and synthetic.

Now, when paradigm shift has taken place in the realm of physical sciences, the realm of social sciences have started to lean towards holism, the exploration of Spenglerian and Kroeberian concepts have become important.

Culture and history are mutually complimentary terms. There can be no history of man apart from history of his culture. Spengler's pithy statement- world history is the collective biography of cultures-says it all. Spengler and Kroeber both have used history as exemplification of culture.

In the nineteenth century culture was viewed as a conscious creation of rational minds for the purpose of improving the lives of the members of a society .This belief underlie the assumption that one society was superior than the other society depending upon the level of intelligence and the way it was put to use. The protagonists of this view were such eminent Victorian anthropologists as Sir Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan.

Reference

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