Chapter 1
Islam, Islams and Stratifications: Problematics of Theory, Methodology and Subject Matter

ABSTRACT

Research on the complexities of Islamic societies under the rubric of “Developing or transitional Countries” do not address their socio-economic statuses, the structure of Muslims’ social actions, their struggles in the process of transition, and their domestic social mobilities in the modern stratified globalized world. For the purpose of disclosure of complexity, the sociological notion of universality of stratification and functionalism, from the traditional view and modern structural-functionalism, are addressed in detail to explore the conditions, means, and ends from both a theoretical view and empirical findings. Attention to history, culture, politics, and religion, as well as status groups such as the ‘ulama and Shi’ite-Sunni Islam and scientific aspirations induces novel uses of Talcott Parsons’ action theory and Max Weber’s interactionism. In terms of methodology, the focal point of this chapter is to try to overcome idealistic empiricism and positivism as fractional legacies of non-interpretive tenets of economics and sociology.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are born into a stratified/hierarchical world that is already in existence. The human child is connected to a larger world by the couple - child “and” care-givers. Ontologically and sociologically speaking, time sets us apart from each other, and aging, structurally, puts us into different categories with access to diminishing social, physical, and mental power. Yet, what is not diminishing is the insisting and undisruptive power of metaphysics, whether in the form of an individual’s spiritual needs or institutional association - what Hegel called “circles of association”.

Dewey, among the American classical pragmatists, discovered that even the most determined anti-metaphysician was likely to find himself doing metaphysics in the course of demonstrating that it was not “do-able.” For this reason, although metaphysics had been “killed off” many times in the history of Western thought, it has always revived (Jones, 1969).

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For Marx, religion as an elusive superstructure that must be abolished, via his radical pragmatism, did not follow Hegel’s circles of association. Rather, it was the circle of the working class and the belief that man created religion rather than religion created man. The reality was that economic activities, characteristically temporal by nature, did not come into existence without a circle of working associations. Both religion and the economy, each with their own forms of associations—one faith-based and the other work based—had a tendency to differentiate, stratify, and interact with each other. It was important to note that perpetual mobility in commercial democracy in America under the influence of Protestantism, produced too much circulation of the classes. Instead, it remained faithful to inequality, in contrast to the French Revolution that premised equality regardless of religious affiliation. The Iranian Revolution, a contemporary example, promised liberty, independence, and the Islamic Republic. But, it paid but lip service to liberty or to equality as the aristocracy shifted from a quasi-secular to a religious circulation.

Tocqueville’s observation of America and its mobility gives us a different perspective. Tocqueville (1805-1859), the French historian and sociologist, saw that it is the perpetual mobility of commercial democracy that makes aristocracy, in fact, impossible. There is too much circulation. Circulation of the members of the classes—especially of the rich class, which is constantly losing its members—means that they are replaced by others (Nisbet, 1966). The metaphor of “circulation” used by Tocqueville about mobility in America signifies what is meant by the structure of temporality built in systems of stratification tending toward the equality and inequality of members of a social class. In caste or slavery systems, there is an obsession with fixity to the extent that members remain within their birthplace system. Pariah produces pariah, slaves produce slaves, and their ascribed status in contrast to an open system of social classes is relatively dependent on localities of economic development. In the cases of both India and America, with caste and slavery systems, the interest to keep humans in bond is supported with some religious legitimation.

In actuality, the relative dependency of economic activities on a specific locality is not incompatible with growth, nor with implementing an economic system—whether in the form of capitalism, socialism or a mixed economy. So, America, in its colonial period, was neither an example of modern capitalism, nor had it expand its economic system to other parts of the world. In contrast, some Muslim societies were characterized by a traditional form of capitalism that was less subject to institutional rationalism. There are many examples of societies in the process of transition from traditional capitalism to modernity, such as, in the cases of Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia. In our reading of Weber, his distinction was to grasp the essence of two types of spirits: that of the traditional economic spirit, tuned to be content; enchanted; and concerned with the hierarchy of values and sympathy, and that of modern capitalism that, qualitatively, was unrestrained by production and consumption, and was disenchanted with a concern for empathy. Generally, the traditional economy still at work in Muslim societies, or its move towards modern capitalism did not develop evenly or similarly in different societies following the same rate and path. Presently, we can contemplate that what exists in different Islamic societies should, preferably, be called Islams.

Being born in the locality of Arabia, it was the universality of Islam that goes beyond its birthplace. As a result, we have multiple Islams, nourished by one causal connection. The analogy that we draw upon is that with multiple Islam, we have economies that were experimentally tested in various shapes from Libya to Iraq, and Syria in its various Baathist forms that incorporated socialism. In addition to Islamic empire building and the territorial expansion beyond a locality, Muslims have been the prime movers of religious messages. They accomplished the delivery through migrations, cultural interactions, and through trade as the dominant system of exchanges based on their own experiences in practicing
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