Stages of Societal Development

On their way to the knowledge age, human societies passed through a few stages; some historians and other social scientists have made the list lengthy, others have abbreviated it. However, each social scientist seems to acknowledge that the two greatest revolutions in human history were the agricultural and industrial revolutions, which gave birth to the agricultural and industrial civilizations. Historians also acknowledge that these two revolutions have had the greatest impact on people’s cultures and economic conditions, or on their general ways of living and states of living. There is also an agreement on at least three major stages of societal development: the hunter-gatherer, the agricultural, and the industrial stage. Nevertheless, a growing number of social scientists think that the information and communications revolutions represent another revolution in human history that is destined to transform both the cultures and economic conditions of peoples of the world. This new stage is often referred to as the post-industrial age, the information age, or the globalization age. I call it the knowledge age, because knowledge and the recent technological innovations and scientific developments it includes are the major forces changing people’s cultures, worldviews, relationships, and economic conditions everywhere.

Analyzing these stages and how they developed should make it possible to place all social, cultural, and economic transformations in their proper historical contexts and thus track the course of societal development over time. The intended analysis, however, is not meant to recount the history of each society or underline the accomplishments of each civilization, but to find that particular thread which runs through all stages of societal development forming the path of the historical process. Emphasis, therefore, will be placed on the major forces of change and transformation and the role they play in linking all stages of societal development to one another and differentiating them from each other.
Historical records of older times seem to suggest that long before the development of agriculture human beings were able to get enough food and attain a sufficient level of security to survive and grow. Familial and tribal ties, as well as customs, norms, and traditions served as social glue that held early human societies together, and gave meaning to their communal life. This simply means that the roots of civilization came into existence probably 20,000 years before the dawn of the agricultural age and the establishment of permanent human settlements. However, it was a primitive civilization based on a food economy that depended primarily on the hunting of animals and the collecting of wild fruits and vegetables. Societies in that civilization were nomadic, and cultures consisted of little more than norms and traditions. The economic arrangements and social organizations were simple and informal and, because of that, early societies remained largely changeless for countless generations.

With the development of agriculture some 10,000 years ago, the economic base of life began to change profoundly, causing culture and the social and economic structures of society to change in ways that made them very different from the tribal ones. “Plant and animal domestication meant much more food and hence much denser human populations. The resulting food surpluses and the animal-based means of transporting those surpluses, were a prerequisite for the development of settled, politically centralized, socially stratified, economically complex, technologically innovative societies.”1 But after agriculture was established and its culture fully developed, the pace of change slowed, causing life conditions to become steady and seem perpetual. Most forces of change were either dormant or yet to be born. Nevertheless, the later centuries of the agricultural era witnessed important developments that included the development of writing, the birth of organized religion and the state, expansion of trade, and the incorporation of merchant life into the life of society, causing the pace of change to accelerate slightly but steadily. Trade helped societies connect with each other and facilitated cultural interaction and technological borrowing, and the state was able to regulate economic and noneconomic relations between neighboring communities, establish law and order, and protect agricultural settlements from invading tribesmen.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the production of manufactured goods emerged in England as the most important, though not the largest, economic activity. This development heralded the coming of a new era, the industrial age, and the dawn of rapid change in all aspects of life. The coming together of major social, cultural, philosophical, scientific, and particularly economic and technological developments is what historians call the Industrial Revolution. It was a revolution that changed the mode of production and production relations, forcing other social and