

The Four-Stage Theory of Development

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An important contribution to Enlightenment notions of progress came from Scottish sociological theories of social development. In Smith's Lectures on jurisprudence (1762), we find a conceptualization that would greatly influence subsequent writing on social theory.

There are four distinct states which mankind passes through. 1st, the age of Hunters; 2nd, the age of Shepherds; 3rd, the age of Agriculture; 4th, the age of Commerce.

If one should suppose ten or twelve persons of different sexes settled in an uninhabited island, the first method they would fall upon for their sustenance would be to support themselves by the wild fruits and wild animals which the country afforded. Their sole business would be hunting the wild beasts or catching the fishes. The pulling of a wild fruit can hardly be called an employment. The only thing amongst them which deserved the appellation of a business would be the chase. This is the age of hunters. In process of time, as their numbers multiplied, they would find the chase too precarious for their support. They would be necessitated to contrive some other method whereby to support themselves. At first perhaps they would try to lay up at one time, when they had been successful, what would support them for a considerable time. But this would go no great length. The contrivance they would think of most naturally would be to tame some of those wild animals they caught, and by affording them better food than what they could get elsewhere, they would induce them to continue about their land themselves and multiply their kind.

Hence would arise the age of shepherds. They would more probably begin first by multiplying animals than vegetables, as less skill and observation would be required: nothing more than to know what food suited them. We find accordingly that in almost all countries the age of shepherds preceded that of agriculture. The Tartars and Arabians subsist almost entirely by their flocks and herds. The Arabs have a little agriculture, but the Tartars none at all. The whole of the savage nations which subsist by flocks have no notion of cultivating the ground. The only instance that has the appearance of an objection to this rule is the state of the North American Indians. They, though they have no conception of flocks and herds, have nevertheless some notion of agriculture. Their women plant a few stalks of Indian corn at the back of their huts: but this can hardly be called agriculture. This corn does not make any considerable part of their

food: it serves only as a seasoning or something to give a relish to their common food, the flesh of those animals they have caught in the chase. Flocks and herds, therefore, are the first resource men would take themselves to when they found difficulty in subsisting by the chase.

But when a society becomes numerous they would find a difficulty in supporting themselves by herds and flocks. Then they would naturally turn themselves to the cultivation of land and the raising of such plants and trees as produced nourishment fit for them: they would observe that those weeds which fell on the dry, bare soil or on the rock, seldom came to anything, but that those which entered the soil generally produced a plant and bore seed similar to that which was sown. These observations they would extend to the different plants and trees they found produced agreeable and nourishing food. And by this means they would gradually advance into the age of Agriculture. As society was farther improved the several arts, which at first would be exercised by each individual as far as was necessary for his welfare, would be separated; some persons would cultivate one and others, as they severally inclined. They would exchange with one another what they produced more than was necessary for their support, and get in exchange for them the commodities they stood in need of and did not produce themselves. This exchange of commodities extends in time not only betwixt the individuals of the same society, but betwixt those of different nations. Thus we send to France our cloths, iron-work and other trinkets, and get in exchange their wines. To Spain and Portugal we send our superfluous corn, and bring from thence the Spanish and Portuguese wines. Thus at last the age of Commerce arises. When therefore a country is stored with all the flocks and herds it can support, the land cultivated so as to produce all the grain and other commodities necessary for our subsistence it can be brought to bear, or at least as much as supports the inhabitants when the superfluous products, whether of nature or art, are exported and other necessary ones brought in exchange, such as society has done all in its power towards its ease and convenience.