

# **Dynamics of Power, Wealth and Knowledge**

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To start with, we need to recognize that power, just like wealth and knowledge, has more than one source; however, the major sources of power are physical power, social power, political power, military power, and economic power. As for wealth, the sources include farmland, buildings, industrial plants, means of production, and financial and natural resources. Knowledge has also several sources that include education, books, languages, cultures, life experiences, creative ideas, human talents, animals, plants, and nature itself.

This paper intends to explain the nature of the relationship that ties power, wealth, and knowledge to each other, how these social forces influence each other, and how they impact the course of change in society.

During the era of tribalism, which witnessed the emergence of signs of civilization in its primitive form, wealth and knowledge were virtually absent from the life of society; and this enabled the traditional social forces to control the sources of power. As a result, old age and the wisdom of the past became the major sources of both power and knowledge in society. In the meantime, the absence of wealth and income, which are the bases of social classes, tribal society escaped the division into socioeconomic classes; and that caused members of each tribe to enjoy equal rights, and vastly reduced the role of exploitation and slavery in tribal societies in general.

However, tribal society was forced by nature and culture to live its entire life on the move; it had to move from one place to another in search of food to collect, and animals to hunt and domesticate. Since domesticated animals were sources of meat and leather and other things, tribal society needed pastureland to feed its animals, and means of power to protect itself. Power during tribal times had two major sources; physical power and social power. Individuals who were physically strong and tribes that had more men were able to attack other tribes, kill their men, rape their women and steal their belongings and ruin their lives. On the other hand, the head of each tribe had social power which was often handed over from father to son to grandson.

Thus nature and the dictates of a nomadic life were instrumental in denying tribal people the opportunity to establish roots in one place, leading them to have no attachment to a particular

place or nation. The family house was the place to which tribal people exhibited the most attachment, and the tribe was the nation to which they belonged. In fact, until the 20th century, each tribe had considered itself a nation and, therefore, it did not recognize the state in which it lived or abide by state laws and rules that defined citizenship rights and political borders. Because of this belief, tribes considered pastureland and water resources common property; and that gave the stronger tribes the power to live wherever they wanted for as long as they wished, thus making power a source of wealth. But when the main institutions of the state were established, especially in Africa and the Middle East, the situation changed drastically, and tribes were forced to abide by state laws.

Because of the nomadic life of the tribal society, the major things that a tribal family was usually able to own were a tent and a sword, a horse or a camel, and some sheep and goats. Nevertheless, tribes that owned more horses, camels, elephants, and other animals suited for travel and carrying people and things long distances were able to acquire more power; thus making wealth a major source of power. Such tribes were able to move faster and use some of their domesticated animals as a means to attack other tribes. This means that power in its social and physical forms was a source of wealth, and wealth in the form of domesticated animals was a source of power. While powerful tribes were able to use their physical power to gain more wealth, wealth in the form of domesticated animals enabled wealthy tribes to gain more power. This is one reason that caused suspicion and enmity to characterize intertribal relationships.

About twelve thousand years ago, man discovered the life cycle of plants, which led him to develop agriculture and farming; and that forced the agricultural man to settle on his land or close to it to take care of his plants and animals. This development caused the greatest revolution in human history; it civilized people as it led them to establish new relationships based on cooperation and trust instead of suspicion and enmity which characterized intertribal relationships for thousands of years. Farming the land and staying close to water sources led subsequently to the emergence of farming communities living in hamlets and small villages; and that led later on to the building of trading centers, towns and cities, and states.

In the agricultural era, private ownership of agricultural land and water sources emerged as an institution with legitimacy, giving the powerful tribes and groups that abandoned grazing and became farmers to seize the best agricultural land and monopolize its use. But given man's need to cultivate his farmland, farmers began to own things that a settled society normally needs to be

productive and comfortable. So, in addition to land and water, the agricultural man owned some tools to till the land and harvest the crops, and some animals to farm the land and transport the produce from farms to homes and markets. As a consequence, private ownership of land and sources of water was transformed into a socioeconomic institution of great importance; and that led subsequently to the development of feudalism and slavery, dividing the agricultural society into two social classes; one rich and free, the other is poor and largely enslaved.

As the powerful social forces in society took possession of land and water and slaves to work on their farms, they were able to devote part of their time to think about life and the universe, and to engage in intellectual activities that led them to create and possess some knowledge. So as social and physical power in tribal times helped the tribal man to acquire wealth, wealth in agricultural times helped wealthy farmers to create and own knowledge.

During the second half of the agricultural age, religion appeared as a sociocultural institution that sought to organize people into communities of faith and regulate social relations; religion was also needed to develop a moral code of conduct and explain the secrets of life, and give believers a sense of peace and comfort. However, the emergence of religion as a sacred institution enabled its men to become an important force, playing a pivotal role in the life of society. Religion urged the rich to sympathize with the poor and asked the strong to help the weak. And by claiming to know the truth regarding life and the afterlife, religion empowered its men to influence people's culture, especially their customs, traditions, values, and relationships. This change came by adding new beliefs and rituals and rites that accepted the traditional way of life of agricultural society and recognized the farming of the land as a legitimate activity.

Centuries later, the state appeared as a political and security institution that sought to keep law and order in the growing agricultural settlements, regulate relationships between clans in hamlets and villages, and protect communities from roaming tribesmen looking for people to victimize; the state also provided better and more secure roads for travelers in general and merchants in particular. And that, in turn, necessitated the formation of armies and state institutions, which gave politicians and army officers enough power to dominate the agricultural society for thousands of years. As a result, the major source of power was transformed from the domain of land and social power to the domain of political and military power; nevertheless, heads of clans continued to have social power, but they were forced by tradition and culture, and belief to share their power with the religious institution and its holy men.

Due to these social transformations, the political figures, the army officers, the religious men and the heads of clans emerged as a privileged social class in control of all sources of power in every farming community and state. While the average farmer owned a small piece of land on which he lived with his family, and on whose produce they survived, members of the new class became landlords owning large estates, where hundreds of workers and slaves worked and lived. In the meantime, the moral and social power which most religious institutions had at the time was instrumental in enabling these institutions to own a large portion of the best land available, enrich themselves, and live a life of affluence, leaving the poor believers to languish in poverty and need and suffer oppression and enslavement. As a consequence, the land had become the major source of wealth, causing powerful people to become wealthy and helping the wealthy to gain extra power. So power and wealth reinforced one another.

But since religious knowledge cannot be proven, all stories about gods and angels and prophets and miracles became claims that cannot be proven. However, in the absence of scientific knowledge to challenge religious knowledge, the agricultural man was easily convinced to believe and be content; he was enticed by the magic of religious stories and rituals and miracles to abdicate his right to think and go beyond the claims and slogans. And that enabled the religious institution to acquire a high moral position in society and employ it to acquire more wealth and influence to shape the social and cultural life of agricultural society for thousands of years to come.

About 260 years ago, several European states were able to move from the agricultural to the industrial age. But societies and states that move from one civilization to another always pass through difficult transitional periods before completing the transition from the old civilization to the new one. Transitional periods, however, represent historical discontinuities that disconnect the old civilization from the new one, creating a new society with its own culture and economy. Due to this transition and the many changes it causes, every industrial state emerged from its transition with a new society, a new culture, and a new, much different economy, causing the social, political, and economic structures of the old society to change fundamentally and irreversibly.

For example, the clan which was the unit of society in the agricultural age was replaced by the nucleolus family in the industrial age, causing the social structure of the new society to change. In the meantime, agricultural production, which was the main economic activity during the agricultural age, was replaced by industrial production, causing the economic structure of society to change. And while most agricultural societies had lived and many still live under oppressive political

systems, industrial societies were transformed in a matter of two centuries into democracies, causing the political structure of society to change as well.

On the other hand, the industrial age witnessed the emergence of many scientific theories and discovered new knowledge and developed new technologies; it also established good schools and universities and built centers of excellence. And that caused wealth to shift from the domain of land to the domain of manufacturing plants, financial institutions, and knowledge. In the meantime, knowledge and technology became important tools for improving labor and machine productivity, causing economies to grow and diversify. In light of the availability of good schools and universities, wealth became a means to acquire scientific knowledge by attending the new schools and universities and traveling around the globe which technology and money facilitated. So, acquiring scientific knowledge became accessible through regular study, practical applications of technologies, and human experience.

As a consequence religious knowledge was exposed as mere claims that have nothing to do with science, causing both religious knowledge and religious men to lose a great deal of the social status and privileges they enjoyed during the agricultural age. Consequently, a large portion of the industrial society lost faith in religion and became more interested in life than in the afterlife, which led them to become more materialistic and less spiritual. And with the passing of time, interest in acquiring more wealth and money became an obsession that undermined the values and ethics of the traditional industrial community. In the meantime, people with knowledge were able to get good jobs and acquire wealth and prestige and play increasing roles in shaping society and its culture, economy, and politics. So knowledge led to wealth and wealth led to all types of power.

On the other hand, the age of industry witnessed the division of society into three distinct social classes: a rich bourgeois class, a poor working class, and a middle class that was neither rich nor poor. This class emerged as a result of economic expansion and diversification, especially in the manufacturing and services sectors. Although this division led to stabilizing the industrial society, it created a rather difficult balance between the various social classes, because their interests were contradictory and could not be reconciled. However, as the industrial society evolved, it witnessed the institutionalization of the democratic idea and its transformation into a system of governance that provided freedom for most people and a good measure of social justice. So all social classes were keen to protect democracy because it gave them the opportunity and the means to pursue their goals and protect their interests peacefully. This means that the balance

came through each party's determination to pursue its interests by recognizing and respecting the rights of the two other parties to pursue their interests as well.

The movement of the major source of wealth from the domain of land to the domain of industrial plants and financial institutions allowed investors and entrepreneurs to gain more wealth. And this enabled the rich to get more economic and social power, as well as the best education available and thus more knowledge. In the meantime, the rich states were able to develop their educational systems, produce more and better-educated manpower, obtain more scientific and technical knowledge and build stronger armies. States with educated people and better infrastructures were able to build productive and diversified economies, manufacture more potent arms, and gain more economic and military power. In the meantime, competition among the major industrial European states caused colonialism to spread around the globe and become a profitable enterprise. Using their economic and military powers, the industrial states were able to colonize the less developed countries and exploit their resources and enslave the poor, the weak, and the less educated peoples of the world.

In the age of knowledge, which is evolving at an astonishing speed in front of our eyes, wealth has moved from the domain of factories to the domain of knowledge. The main components of knowledge in this age are financial and consulting services, information and communications technologies, computer applications, creative ideas, and artificial intelligence. In light of the success of knowledge in assuming the most important position in society, it has become a source of wealth and a means to acquire power. But due to the nature and social role of knowledge, the social structure of the knowledge society has changed substantially; it has become a society composed more of sociocultural groups than socioeconomic classes. Sociocultural groups have varying levels of education, different cultures and subcultures, multiple interests, and diversified national and global affiliations. As a consequence, religion is experiencing a precipitous decline in its social role in the new society, and knowledge is distancing itself from its human message. Knowledge throughout history was more spiritual than material; today it has become more material than anything else.

Meanwhile, the division of the knowledge society into sociocultural groups based on knowledge and culture and education, rather than wealth and income, has caused the role of nationality and loyalty to a country and people to diminish. And whereas wealth in previous eras was fixed as farms and land and manufacturing plants, scientific knowledge and financial services

and information technology and computer applications have changed the faces and functions of all economies. As a result, wealth and income gaps widened in society, poverty and ignorance increased, the size and influence of the middle class shrank, the sense of belonging to a nation and people declined, and cultural ties within minorities and ideological communities increased, causing cultural ghettos to form and spread and persist everywhere.

So wealth in the form of industrial plants and financial resources has enabled individuals, groups, and societies to gain advanced knowledge; in turn, knowledge has enabled the more knowledgeable individuals and companies and groups and nations to gain more wealth and power to influence change in society and the world. As a result, the physical and social power, which were the major sources of power and prestige in the tribal age, have lost their role in influencing the direction of change in all societies that live in the agricultural age and beyond. Similarly, land ownership and slaves, which were the major source of wealth and power in the agricultural age, are no longer able to play their traditional roles in the knowledge society and influence the direction of change at any level. This means that knowledge that includes education, creativity, rare talent, scientific facts, technology, computer applications, and artificial intelligence has become the major source of economic and political, and military power.

It is clear from the above analysis that neither land ownership nor raw power nor industrial plants nor money can compete with scientific knowledge in gaining power and transforming societies. Therefore, any societal transformation should be sought through the acquiring of good education, the development of more sophisticated theoretical and technological, and scientific knowledge, and the building of institutions that facilitate the process of acquiring knowledge and developing more advanced knowledge.

Accepting these conclusions means that the less developed nations should not start their quest for development by concentrating on making agriculture more productive or building new factories to produce goods for exports. Although the development of the agricultural and industrial sectors is very important and therefore should be a major part of any development strategy, emphasis should be placed on acquiring the latest scientific and technological knowledge. And since the new knowledge is more service-oriented, priority should be given to the development of information and banking and telecommunications systems, and the building of scientific research centers to produce more knowledge and disseminate it in society. Therefore, reforming the educational system and upgrading its contents, and reinventing the methods of teaching should

have priority over everything else. This means that the coming decade will be the decade of education because there is a worldwide need to rethink the way we teach our young people and what to teach them. And this means that for a development strategy to succeed it has to start from the bottom up and from the top down at the same time, where students get a good education and the state builds its institutions and the national economy. However, no reform and development strategy can last long, be dynamic, and self-reinforcing if it fails to meet people's need to have the freedom to think and work and criticize all systems and enjoy equal opportunities.

For poor states seeking to develop their economies and societies, they need to adopt new strategies that start by acquiring knowledge and building advanced education and research institutions, because such institutions are the means to acquire, produce and disseminate knowledge in society. The age of starting the development process by developing the agricultural sector, raising the productivity of farms and farmers, and building factories are gone. India gives a good example of a nation that focused on acquiring knowledge, particularly in the information technologies field, and achieved great success. But since knowledge covers all scientific fields and aspects of life, India's progress made the development of both the agricultural and industrial sectors easier than before. This means that emphasis on knowledge does not neglect the agricultural or the industrial sector; on the contrary, it makes development a comprehensive societal process.

*Since my motto is, "Knowledge not shared is Knowledge wasted, and the more we share, the more we gain knowledgeable people" I ask all readers to recommend every article and book they like because it will help inform others. We all share the responsibility to make our world more hospitable to peace, social justice, and freedom; a lofty goal we cannot reach without spreading knowledge and awareness in every corner of our mother earth.*

**Prof. Rabie** is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 52 books in addition to over 100 scholarly papers and 1,500 newspaper articles. Books are 15 in English, one in Albanian, and 36 in Arabic. English Books include four published by Palgrave Macmillan between 2013 and 2017: *Saving Capitalism and Democracy*; *Global Economic and Cultural Transformation*; *A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development*; *The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications*. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington,



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