



## Social Evolution

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### Abstract

*Literature, which marks the major landmarks in history, focuses on events at the micro and individual level, and can thereby uncover significant social processes either overlooked or difficult to document from the historical record. This article illustrates, using Anthony Trollope's novel Doctor Thorne, the social evolution of England in the 19th century. Trollope depicts social evolution at the level of decisions, events and acts involving individuals, which aggregate to acquire wider social significance. These movements provide insight into the evolution of society. Society has evolved over the centuries, but the evolution has been mostly unconscious. Knowledge of the process of social development revealed by the study of literature may be applied consciously to facilitate and accelerate social progress. Conscious development abridges time. Trollope's works, like all great works of literature, can be an invaluable aid in our effort to comprehend the evolution of society and devise ways to accelerate it.*

Revolutions come in many forms. There are the traditional ones, with mass uprisings, violence and dethroning. In what was perhaps one of the earliest revolutions nearly three thousand years ago, the Babylonians overthrew the Assyrian empire in a long, bitter war and declared their independence. There are others, well planned and executed, that silently repaint the landscape. The Russian October Revolution was launched by Lenin, signaled by a blank shot. Hardly another shot needed to be fired as the Bolsheviks took over all critical power centers in Petrograd. They entered and almost got lost in the vast Winter Palace, stumbling upon members of the government who still remained inside. Illiterate revolutionaries compelled the arrested men to write their own arrest warrants. Thus was born the Soviet Union.

Some revolutions seem doomed to failure. The Irish Rebellion failed to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The Tiananmen Square protests may be discussed the world over, but not in the land where it took place. There are yet other attempts, apparent failures, that in retrospect can be seen to mark the beginning of truly radical change. Spartacus and his 70,000 slaves who attempted to escape during the Roman slave rebellion were annihilated by the powerful Roman army, but their unconquerable spirit left an impact on the Romans, who reduced the number of their slaves, looked elsewhere for laborers, and began to treat the remaining slaves less harshly.

Some are led by one man, others by countless men and women all over the land. Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution that led to the Arab Spring of 2010 began with a poor vegetable seller who did not live to see the global impact of his suicidal act. Some are carried out in ways so unconventional. Mahatma Gandhi ousted the British colonialists from India by defying

the British prohibition on salt production, encouraging Indians along the country's over 4,000 mile coastline to make their own salt. The Estonian Singing Revolution began with spontaneous all night chorus at a music festival, and culminated in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania declaring independence from the USSR.

The weapons wielded in the struggles vary widely. The guillotine was a symbol of the French Revolution in the 1790s, with which the people wiped out their aristocracy in an attempt to level society. Such a contrast was the Carnation Revolution that overthrew dictatorship in Portugal in the 1970s, when people joined the military revolutionaries by sticking carnations in their uniforms and rifle muzzles. Perhaps the most unexpected, that took even the techno savvy of the world by surprise, was the smart phone, which along with Facebook facilitated a mass uprising in Egypt.

Whatever may be the form a revolution takes, and whatever the mode and weapon employed, the cause is invariably the same. Since the first revolution in recorded history some five thousand years ago, when the Sumerian king Lugaland was overthrown because of his corruption and injustice, every revolution has been an expression of people's aspiration - for food, for freedom, for security, for happiness.

A revolution is defined as a complete, radical change. But not all changes go by the name of revolution. There are also the silent, slow changes, often unnoticed till afterwards. They too, are an answer to humanity's primal longings, the result of unvoiced, collective aspirations. Revolutions can be traced as far back as five millennium ago. But evolution is older than humanity itself. The aspiration for food, family, happiness and power spurred early human beings to evolve socially mentally, culturally and spiritually.

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When man discovered that he could imitate Nature and produce food where he lived rather than go searching for it, agriculture and animal husbandry were born and permanent settlements developed. When he discovered the power of symbolic communication, language evolved. As interactions became more and more complex, trade, markets, urban centers, governance and law came into existence. The thirst for knowledge led to inventions. The printing press facilitated the dissemination of knowledge. The spirit of adventure led to the age of exploration. Unknown expanses of land and sea were drawn on the world map, and brought closer and closer together in a world shrinking due to technology that has conquered time and space. Every invention, every discovery, every change in the history of mankind has been the consequence of an expanding human awareness and rising human aspiration resulting in

new and higher forms of social organization. Life “evolves through growth of consciousness, even as consciousness evolves through greater organization...”<sup>1</sup> Every period – the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, the Information Age – is a reflection of this evolutionary process.

## WAAS Project on Ideas can Change the World

*This is the first in a series of articles reproduced from the January '13 Op-Ed as a call to Fellows for ideas that can change the world. All Fellows are invited to send in contributions (500-1000 words) for publication in WAAS Op-Ed.*

### The Symbol Dawn

**Garry Jacobs**

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Ideas define our view of the world. Ideas determine the world. Ideas have the power to change the world – beyond recognition. Our senses observe and take in data from the environment to generate sense impressions. Our minds combine, associate and coordinate sense data to formulate thoughts, as Pavlov perceived the relationship between stimulus and response in a dog. Our thinking minds combine, associate and extract the common essence of several thoughts to conceive complex ideas, as Copernicus extracted the essence of numerous observed facts and concepts about the revolution of the planets to reverse the prevailing conception of a geocentric universe. We know the world indirectly through thought. All our knowledge is based on this indirect process of receiving, interpreting and converting sensory data into simple thoughts and recombining those thoughts to form complex ideas.

Ideas are symbols for reality, not reality itself. Therefore the idea of a symbol may be considered the first of all ideas. The dawn, fire, a rose flower and a ring are symbols as well as facts. A symbol is something – a sound, numeral, word, image, object, name, title – that is employed by the mind to represent something intangible. Signs convey information. Symbols convey power and inspiration. More than the discovery of fire, the wheel or agriculture, symbols are the basis for our emergence from the forest and our evolution beyond the animal to conscious mental living. Human civilization and culture are founded on intangible abstract symbols. Symbols are the basis for our communication, exchange, relationship, social organization, governance, knowledge, education, science and arts.

Today humanity enjoys an unprecedented abundance unimaginable to past generations. Yet at the same time we are increasingly constrained by a sense of limits. The earth is crowded with teeming millions, non-renewable resources are being consumed at an alarming pace, poverty persists in spite of exponential increases in production, insecurity still haunts us in the midst of our invulnerable defenses, uncertainty prevails in spite of an ever-increasing glut of information.

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## Language as an Idea

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Language is an idea that has had infinite power to stimulate the growth of civilization. As the potential growth of language is unlimited, so too is society's power for development.

The power of ideas was born with the birth of Language. Language itself is one of the most fundamental of all ideas, like the idea of organization. It is the idea that sounds, signs and notations can be employed as symbols to represent people, places, objects, events, actions, thoughts, feelings, intentions, other ideas, the unseen, unknown and even – as in the case of a mantra – the unknowable. It is a conscious organization of signs, sounds, words, categories of words according to standards, conventions, customs, rules and creative inspiration to represent material facts, emotional attitudes, thoughts, complex ideas and to give symbolic expression to that which is immaterial and ineffable.

The development of symbolic language marks a radical step in the evolution of human beings from the animal kingdom. While animals may instinctively communicate through sounds and gestures, none that we know of possesses the capacity for the conscious creation of new forms of complex symbolic language.

Language is the first bridge linking one human being to another in an effective and affective relationship. As money is the language of commerce, language is the essential medium of exchange for the 'commerce' of human relationship, for without language our physical, economic, social, emotional and intellectual interactions and exchanges with other human beings would be limited to the most primitive, rudimentary forms of physical association and exchange. It is the first human social organization upon which all others are based. It is social for its value arises from the fact that it is recognizable and accepted by other human beings. As money is valueless to a man stranded alone on a deserted island, the full value and power of language emerge only in a social context.

Initially, language developed to represent objects and facts, making possible the communication and organization of information. Later it evolved to make possible the coordination of facts as thoughts and the coordination of thoughts as complex, abstract ideas. The development of language reflects, supports and directs the development of consciousness. They are mutually interdependent.

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History and biography provides insights into this process, but much of it falls beneath the radar screen of historical fact. It can only very partially recreate or infer the thought processes, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of which historical facts are an expression. Great literature offers more, for it captures the ideas, motivations, aspirations, superstitions, ambitions and fears as well as the mental, social, cultural and psychological atmosphere in which individuals and groups live and act. The creative imagination of great writers reveal through their stories far more than merely character and action. The views of the protagonists depict the prevailing ideas and beliefs of the day. Their struggles and hopes reflect the aspirations of

the times. Their failures and successes reveal the social, economic and political climate and conditions in which they lived. On the surface the plot describes a course of action, but it also depicts the course of social evolution. In other words, the writer paints a miniature of a living and evolving world in his pages. One such world created is Anthony Trollope's Barsetshire.

Anthony Trollope was one of the most successful English writers in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. He was a respected and prolific novelist, and he set a number of his stories in the imaginary county of Barsetshire in England. Trollope was a political novelist with 'steady interest in the effects of history and of power relationships on everyday life', who had the ability to 'represent broad historical changes by a few carefully drawn characters rooted in a particular environment'.<sup>2</sup> One of the Barset chronicles, Doctor Thorne, revolves around a country doctor and his niece. Doctor Thorne, a respectable and successful physician brings up his niece, Mary, the illegitimate child of his brother, to be a good natured, high principled girl. The son of the county squire, Frank Gresham, is in love with Mary. The Greshams are an old, reputed family, but have lately fallen on hard times. Their estate is heavily mortgaged to a worker turned railway contractor who has seen a meteoric rise in his fortunes. This nouveau riche man, Sir Roger Scatcherd, also happens to be Mary's uncle on her mother's side. Frank is under pressure from his mother and titled relatives to court money and property. They try to match him with the wealthy Miss Dunstable, the heiress to a fortune made in trade by her father. Lady Gresham overlooks the lack of title, and hopes for a rich match for her son. Frank is unable to stand up to his august family at first, and makes a poor attempt at striking gold through marriage, but is quickly brought back to his senses, and to Mary. Sir Roger Scatcherd passes away, leaving all his wealth to his closest relative, Mary. Now it turns out that most of the Gresham property is in Mary's hands, and a marriage between Frank and Mary not only unites the happy couple but also retrieves the Gresham property. Lady Gresham receives her daughter in law she has till the day before opposed, with the words 'Dear Mary', and Trollope concludes the story with a happy ending for the lovers as well as their property. A simple straightforward story, almost moral in its implication, reveals the deep undercurrents shaping society.

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Trollope depicts social evolution at the micro level of decisions and events involving individuals which aggregate to acquire wider social significance, in a manner similar to the way legal theorists have documented the role of micro level events in the evolution of law.<sup>3</sup> Historical studies focusing on political change, war and major social events tend to overlook this very gradual and subtle process of social change. For this reason, the study of literature can provide original insights into a scientific study of the process of social development.<sup>4</sup>

It was a period of revolutionary change in Europe. A half century before the story was written, the guillotine had decimated the entire upper class of France. Trollope's early works in the 1840s hint of the fear that the revolution might spread across the channel to England.<sup>5</sup>

English society sought to avoid revolution by a more gradual and less violent process of evolutionary change. With subtle insight and attention to detail, Trollope depicts the direction, nature and future course of those changes in his Barsetshire series, written in the 1850s. Dr. Thorne traces elements of the process by which England evolved into a more liberal, egalitarian society.

The conservative, class conscious society in rural England that frowned upon even a slight act of impropriety was boldly introduced to Mary. The much respected and liked Dr. Thorne, whose livelihood depended on his acceptance and patronage by those around, took her into his home. Mary's background was murky. Her mother, a poor girl, was seduced and later abandoned by Dr. Thorne's brother. The girl's brother, later to become Sir Roger Scatcherd, was outraged. He murdered the culprit and served time in jail. After giving birth to the fatherless child, the young mother left the infant in the care of Dr. Thorne and migrated to a new life in America. This child, who had lost her father before birth and mother soon afterwards, received education, a good upbringing, parental care and love, and most to the point, the acceptance of society. When life outside, and even within the house was ruled by a strict code of conduct, when dress and manners were according to protocol, and society venerated tradition, custom, propriety and values handed down over generations, a girl with a rogue for a father, murderer for an uncle, and a mother who abandoned her at birth, a girl with no title, property or accomplishment, was warmly embraced by all her acquaintances. Instead of becoming an outcaste, Mary was accepted into the highest society in the neighborhood and became a companion to Squire Gresham's daughters. The impenetrable barriers between classes were beginning to be relaxed, and intermixture between the classes became increasingly common.

One of the dramatic changes in the national psyche was the reduced importance accorded to birth.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, if a man's lineage could be traced back over a dozen generations, if an ancestor had been knighted by a former monarch, if his family estate was a few centuries old, and of course if its value an impressive sum, then the man was respected. He gained entry into the highest circles in the country, his acquaintance was sought eagerly. He wielded considerable influence, his word carried more weight than his fellow countrymen not born into such privilege. High society, politics, church – all were open to him if he cared. Such men and women were prize catches in the marriage market. Often, beauty, youth, even values and reputation were overlooked in an effort to marry an heir or heiress. Birth was everything.

Such a society slowly started rearranging itself along different lines.<sup>7</sup> Roger Scatcherd began humbly as a stone mason. When fury overtook him at the thought of the wrong done his sister, he landed in jail for murder. His situation could not have been much worse as he stepped out of jail after many years. His willingness to work hard was all he had, but that stood him well. He became a contractor, first for odd jobs, and gradually worked his way up to become a railway contractor. There had been a task of the railways urgently required, that involved extraordinary physical and mental resources. Scatcherd had been the man for it. He had done the job, and as recognition for the work, been knighted by the queen. In earlier times when society was predominantly agricultural, when the tenant farmers worked on the land and paid rent to the nobleman, the gentleman could generously lend his fine manners and breeding to pleasurable past times such as hunting or entertaining friends. But with industrialization came different needs, needs that could not be met by finery or stateliness.

Needs that could only be met by the assets that the likes of Roger Scatcherd possessed – diligence, physical strength, fortitude, willingness to soil one's hands and clothes with sweat and grime. The successful completion of the railway work brought Scatcherd what birth had denied him – title, fame, wealth and a new kind of respect. Previously respect had been reserved for title and rank that came with birth. Hard work was looked down upon, the need to work hard was treated with commiseration. A life of idleness or one spent in the pursuit of pleasure was respected. Gradually merit, accomplishment and earned wealth acquired greater respectability and became a means of entry into high society. Scatcherd, now Sir Roger Scatcherd, contested in the elections, and came close to becoming a member of parliament.

In spite of the wealth, accomplishment and title, Sir Roger's crude manners still grated on people's sensitivities, but if one polished one's outside, one could even outshine the natural-born aristocrats. Because of her enormous wealth, Miss Dunstable was made very much of by everyone, even though the source of that wealth was commerce rather than landed property. She was sociable and witty and spent generously. Her invitations were gratefully accepted, she was perseveringly courted by men of noble families. Her stay in a friend's country estate added charm to her hosts and their estate. Everyone tried to please her, bachelors tried to woo her, ladies treasured her friendship, and Frank Gresham was sent off to win her heart, or at least hand, in marriage, in order to secure her wealth to save the Gresham property. Lady Gresham who set great store by birth and rank was willing to forego the pristine prestige that nobility gave, to the more tangible advantage that her wealth would provide to save the family property. In earlier times, class barriers were strong and high. They were guarded jealously from any contamination from below. New money could not hope to buy its way into the higher society. For it still carried with it a faint odor of trade that was looked down upon. A few still did so, secretly, for Miss Dunstable's fortune had been made in selling medicinal oil. But the very size of wealth had washed away the odor of oil, and just as success gave Sir Roger a new kind of respectability, enormous money hewed a shortcut into the nobleman's world for the Miss Dunstables of the time. Money became the new currency.

As every old value was giving way to the new, so it was with parental authority. The arranged marriage was prevalent at the time.<sup>8</sup> The parents, and very often even the uncles, aunts and grandparents settled marriages in much the same way business transactions are arranged. The match was weighed according to a number of values. One was the value of the property and settlements made on the person. A title of marquis or earl tipped the balance most decidedly, compared to which virtues such as character and accomplishment were but minor issues to be considered or ignored as per convenience. Affection and love were often absent. A marriage was a good one if it was good in the material sense. Lady Gresham had married Squire Gresham for his wealth and the good name of his family, but she couldn't compare herself with the superior match her sister had made by marrying a duke. In her ambitions for her son, she insisted on his marrying a lady of fortune, even if the lady was older than he was and owed her fortune to oil trade. Miss Dunstable too was nudged by many in the 'right' direction, towards Frank. But in what was a breakaway from tradition, Frank and Miss Dunstable looked upon the match as silly scheming. They laughed over the family's interference and indulged their older relatives for a while. But all along, Frank was true to his love for Mary Thorne, and even confessed it to Miss Dunstable. Attachment rather than advantage determining marriage was becoming more common among the upper classes. Rules were

rewritten, practices that bound people stronger than fetters gave way, traditional authority was cast aside, when Frank refused to sacrifice his ideals to the choice of the collective. The individual in every man and woman stirred to life.

The herd mentality had been an overpowering force. Food, fashion, recreation, learning were all decided by the collective. If broad brimmed hats were the fashion in Paris, they were adopted in London, and later, made their way to Barsetshire. If fox hunting was taken up by an aristocrat, others followed him. Every girl aspired to marry young and marry well because every other girl wanted to.<sup>9</sup> In this way, one's role had been scripted by society. Young men chose to enter the church or army, become sailors or study law because others respected these professions. The individual was lost in the collective, as even his values were directed by what others valued.

Men and women slowly began to see that they had a choice.<sup>10</sup> If they chose, they could be free, free to be happy, to choose the life they desired — just as Frank chose. When his thoughts and feelings were unsettled, he did as he was bid, swayed one way now, another way next. But when he decided he would follow his heart, he would not choose the mercenary path his mother showed, give up all material comforts if it came to that and marry Mary, Frank asserted his individuality. He expressed an emerging trend that was shocking at first, admired later, and eventually emulated universally.

This birth of individuality we see in Frank Gresham's simple decision to marry Mary Thorne is an indication of the upheaval that was taking place in society. Something in the inscrutable darkness stirred. Society was awakening to the value of individuality. The Industrial Revolution changed the face of England. New lands were found, new settlements founded. Monarchy gave way to democracy, science dispelled ignorance, medicine conquered disease, inventions made life easier. The world developed more rapidly than it had in the previous millennia. And it began with a change, in man's mind, when Doctor Thorne boldly introduced Mary to the world as his niece, when Roger Scatcherd worked hard and earned success and knighthood, when Miss Dunstable boldly pushed open the gates to the world of aristocracy undeterred by low birth and background, when Frank Gresham and Mary broke free of the invisible yet strong fetters of society and chose to be true to each other, and to themselves.

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Careful study of a movement, be it from a story or a page in history, places characters and events in social perspective.<sup>11</sup> Frank loved Mary one minute, bowed to his mother's wishes the next, confided in Miss Dunstable later, and came back to Mary finally. He did not know that he was liberating the individual in man when he refused to bow to parental pressure. But we, with the advantage of our perspective, can see the complete picture. Nathaniel Haw-

thorne called Trollope's work, 'just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business'.<sup>12</sup>

When a young aristocrat in a story chooses to give up his leisurely life in the country estate and pursue trade, it is representative of the collective choice of the aristocracy, to give up its old sedentary ways and embrace modernization. When the peasants rose up in revolt against their feudal master in the past, and dictators are overthrown and freedom movements spread as if by contagion today, it is because of the collective aspiration for freedom and equality. Mass movements start with one individual and an inspiration.<sup>13</sup> These movements and changes, studied, give us an insight into the evolution of humanity.

Society has evolved over the centuries, but the evolution has been mostly unconscious.<sup>14</sup> Just as we learn to replicate discoveries initially made by accident, we can discover the process of social development and apply that knowledge consciously to facilitate and accelerate it. Conscious development abridges time. What would otherwise take centuries to achieve by trial and error may be accomplished instead within a few decades. Anthony Trollope's works are 'valuable in our efforts to explain ourselves to ourselves'.<sup>15, 16</sup> Study of Trollope's works, like all great works of literature, can be invaluable aids in our effort to comprehend the evolution of society and devise ways to accelerate it.

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### Notes

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