

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 11
Classical Thinkers of Sociology

Welcome back to the class. We are moving to the next chapter, in which we begin to analyze the contributions of important thinkers. In the previous classes, we had brief discussions about a number of social, cultural, political and economic factors that leads to the emergence of sociology and we basically tried to answer the question ‘why that sociology emerged in Europe during that particular time?’

What were the kind of a social political contexts that necessitated the emergence of a new discipline? Why that the scholars found it imperative to look for novel methodological framework and epistemological base to make sense of the society that was evolving around them. We kind of answered that the kind of time period that we are talking about, 18th and 19th century, really represented some of the most tumultuous times in the history of Europe.

The world order was changing and great transformation was sweeping across the continent. That really necessitated quite a lot of new changes and a series of philosophers pondered over those changes. Ultimately, that resulted in the codification of a new set of ideas, principles, and methodological orientations and finally you have this discipline called sociology. In this section, we are going to discuss some of the very important classical thinkers who pioneered the discipline of sociology.

We will look at a set of thinkers or a series of thinkers who laid the foundation for the discipline, whose intellectual engagements, whose arguments, whose counterarguments, whose new propositions really laid the foundation for a new discipline to take shape and to take root and then eventually get consolidated.

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- Montesquieu -1689-1755
- Saint Simon- 1760-1825
- Auguste Comte – 1798-1857
- Herbert Spencer -1820-1903
- Karl Marx- 1818-1883
- Emile Durkheim-1858-1917
- Max Weber- 1864-1920
- GH Mead- 1863-1931



I have put up a list of scholars and by no means this list exhaustive and not complete. I have omitted a couple of names because it is a very difficult task to enlist each and every scholar who would have contributed in this long journey of a particular discipline, especially in its formative years. For the purpose of this course, we will discuss the contributions of Montesquieu, Saint Simon, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and GH Mead.

We will have brief discussions about Montesquieu, Saint Simon, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer because these are the people who are considered to be the very important people who contributed for the establishment of the discipline and played a very important role in the germination of the discipline as a kind of a transformation from social philosophy to sociology.

We will go much deeper into these four people who are considered to be the kind of stalwarts, and to be the pioneers who laid the most rigorous theoretical foundation and methodological orientation for the discipline. They are Karl Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Mead. These four thinkers would be dealt with extensively in the coming classes whereas we will not go that detail about the first four scholars.

You would have identified that most of these people belong to Europe. Montesquieu, Saint Simon, Auguste Comte and Spencer is from England, Marx and Weber are a Germans,

Durkheim is a French, and GH Mead is from United States of America. Mostly we have scholars from Western Europe who played very vital role in the emergence of the discipline.

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Montesquieu (1689-1755)



- French Philosopher- debate on sociologist or not
- *The Spirit of the Laws*: that society must be considered a "thing." As a thing, its properties could be discovered by observation and analysis. Thus, for Montesquieu, morals, manners, and customs, as well as social structures, are amenable to investigation in the same way as are things or phenomena in physics and chemistry.



Let us begin with the Montesquieu. He was born in 1689 and passed away in 1755 and he was a French philosopher. There is very raging debate about the exact place of Montesquieu in the history of sociology. Can you call him as a sociologist or not? This is a very difficult question but almost every observers argue that Montesquieu played a very vital role in laying the foundations of the emergence of sociology.

Sociology as a distinct discipline did not exist during Montesquieu's time. Therefore it would be very difficult to label him as sociologist as the way we are able to label later scholars. However, he was an extremely influential thinker who laid foundation for the theoretical arguments about the society.

In one most important books titled 'The spirit of the laws', he says that society must be considered as a thing and its properties could be discovered by observation and analysis. Thus for Montesquieu morals, manners and customs as well as social structure are amenable to investigation in the same way as the phenomena in physical, phenomena in physics and chemistry.

This paragraph is very important because here comes a philosopher who argues that society must be considered as a thing. We will come back to this word 'thing' later when we discuss Emile

Durkheim because in his definition of social fact, he argues that a social fact is a thing. It has an objective reality out there. It has its own existence. It is Sui generis.

Emile Durkheim was heavily influenced by thinkers like Montesquieu and Auguste Comte who preceded him. Here Montesquieu argues that the society must be seen as a separate entity. That is one part of the story. The other argument is that this thing has its own properties and it could be discovered by observation and analysis and he is bringing in the argument of scientific methodology.

Thus for Montesquieu morals, manners and customs as well as social structures are amenable to investigation the same way they are with physics and chemistry. This is a very powerful argument where he points out that the scientific methods that are in practice to understand the physical and chemical world can be used to understand the nature of society. For example, morals, manners and customs and social structures can be studied the same way you study physical or chemical world.

This is a very important argument. This was a major departure from the traditional conventional ways in which theoretical explanations or more obscure kind of philosophical or metaphysical arguments were given were given as the most convincing explanation to understand the society.

Here Montesquieu criticizes the arguments about theological or metaphysical explanation about social reality and then argues that instead of using these arguments, you can use the methodology of science.

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- Attempted to formulate human laws and social institutions. Theorisation on government, conception of liberty, political power, religion, climate, geography and so on.
- three types of governments: republican governments, which can take either democratic or aristocratic forms; monarchies; and despotisms.
- implies a developmental sequence, and a typology to capture the empirical world.



He attempted to formulate human laws and social institutions, theorization on government, conceptions of liberty, political power, religion, climate, and geography and so on. We will see how extensive his research interests were and he was quite interested to formulate human laws. This term 'human laws' is something very important and this is an extremely important indication of the fact that these early scholars were very particular about formulating laws.

You will see the same argument in Saint Simon, and in Auguste Comte who believed that just like the physical laws or laws in biology or laws in chemistry, you will be able to formulate laws about society. You will be able to formulate overarching laws about society, which will be able to rule or which will discover the ways in which human society function. This is an argument that none of the social scientists would agree today.

However, given the understanding that sociology emerged as a science, especially heavily influenced by natural science, this was a predictable turn. They wanted to formulate human laws similar to natural laws. Montesquieu had very extensive research interests spanning across different distinct area, starting from notions of liberty and government to religion, climate and geography and so on.

One of his major contributions is his typology of different forms of governments, in which he talked about Republican governments (which can take either democratic or aristocratic forms),

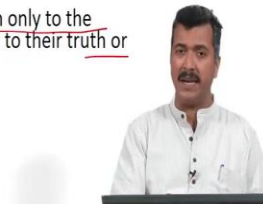
monarchies and despotism. Montesquieu's this contribution is widely considered to be very important one.

He talked about these three distinct forms of government systems with a developmental sequence. He argued that mostly the societies move from despotism to monarchy and to that of Republican governments that could take either forms such as democracy or aristocracy.

He had this kind of an evolutionary understanding of governance and it implies that it has a developmental sequence. He also tried to put forward this typology on the basis of capturing this schema from the empirical world. Instead of merely proposing a normative structure, you come across a philosopher who observed different kind of government systems across the world and then put forward the kind of typology.

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- His arguments on separation of powers between executive, legislative and judiciary to prevent despotism
- His idea of liberty as limited and in recognizing the rights of others
- Liberty also requires that the laws concern only threats to public order and security and in that sense, laws should not concern offences against God.
- Montesquieu considers religions "in relation only to the good they produce in civil society", and not to their truth or falsity.



Another very important contribution that we consider even now as a foundational rules of modern democratic system is the separation of powers between executive, legislative and judiciary to prevent despotism. This particular separation of powers which are considered to be very sacrosanct and important even today.

know that the kind of a separation between executive, the body that executes the rules and the legislative body, the body that formulate new rules and the judiciary who works as an arbitrator, and certifies the legality of these new laws must be separated. You cannot allow an authority that has a power over all these three distinct forms.

That is how every efficient democracy functions. They work as counterbalances. They ensure that no one part either executive or legislative or judiciary gets excessive powers. And this discussion, as you all know is extremely relevant even now. We talk about necessity for the independence of the judiciary, we talk about the distinction between executive and legislation and we argue that for a healthy democracy to thrive, these three spheres must be separated.

You cannot allow one powerful entity to have absolute control over everything. You cannot allow somebody to be the person who formulates his own rules and who executes it and who also presides over legality. That leads to what he calls it as the despotism. He argued that liberty is not without restrictions, liberty is not without boundaries. Liberty has to be limited and it must recognize the rights of others.

Therefore he developed an argument that the idea of individual freedom must be exercised in consonance with the rights of the people who are around you. It is a very important liberal principle. Liberty also requires that the laws concerns only threats to public order and security. And it should not even concern offenses against God.

Here you come across very interesting argument of Montesquieu, who is very critical of the idea and institution of God. He argues that liberty also requires that the laws concerns only threats to public order and security. So anything that can adversely affect the public order or the safety and security of the people must be kept in mind when you formulate the rules and laws about liberty.

Similarly, anything that does not adversely affect the public order and security must be allowed because human beings do have the right to profess their liberty. In that sense, laws should not concern offences against God. This is a very interesting argument, because an act which is supposedly offensive to God, according to Montesquieu has no problem because this particular act will not affect public order.

He even argued that a criticism against God should be welcomed and people must be allowed to do that because by doing that, you are not doing anything to offend or disturb the public order.

Just think about the arguments of this particular theme in different societies where blasphemy laws are very powerful in a number of countries because any references or any offensive reference about God is seen as blasphemous and punishable by law.

The argument here is that you must not insult or abuse or criticize God because that is seen as blasphemy, not because it is injurious to the public order but it was seen as an offense against the God itself which is punishable in the societies that are governed by religious rules.

Montesquieu considers religions in relation only to the good they produce in civil society and not to their truth or falsity. You see it is a major departure from the early theological argument that the religion tells you the truth and offers you the explanation for everything. Here Montesquieu argues that religion is important and as a universal institution, it plays important function but he is not concerned with whether religious explanation is true or false. He only concerned about what religion does in the public realm and only at the good that it produce in the civil society and what kind of roles that religions perform in the civil society.

That is the only relevance that he attributed to religion, not as a divine system, not as the epitome of all the truth or all the divine revelations, nothing of that sort. In a sense, he a kind of secularized the understanding of religion by specifically saying that he is not interested to see whether the religion is true or false rather he understands it as an important social institutions. Only to the extent that it performs certain good things and services to the civil society.

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Saint Simon (1760-1825)



- Had a crucial role in the early nineteenth-century developments of industrial socialism, positivism, sociology, political economics, and the philosophy of history.
- He was one of the first to grasp the revolutionary implications of "industrialization" for traditional institutions and morality and to conceptualize the industrial system as a distinctive type.
- Saint-Simon envisioned an industrialist state directed by modern science, in which universal association should suppress war. He believed that the men who are successfully able to organize society for productive labor are entitled to govern it.



Another very important French theorist is Saint Simon, who was born in 1760 and passed away in 1825, and considered to be a very influential scholar. He had a crucial role in the early 19th century developments of industrial socialism, positivism, sociology, political economics and the philosophy of history. He was a philosopher who had varied interests and whom we cannot label as a philosopher or a sociologist or a political theorist. He was a person who had a very extensive range of interests and one of the first to grasp the revolutionary implications of industrialization.

He was one of the first European thinkers who identified that the kind of changes that are happening as a result of rapid industrialization is leading to a comprehensive change in the social structure. He argued that industrial society represents a kind of a rupture from the traditional agrarian society.

He was rather kind of welcoming to these changes for a traditional institutions and morality and conceptualized industrial system as the distinctive type. As a philosopher he argued that these changes are not only having its implications in terms of economy or in terms of science and technology, but rather they have tremendous implications in the whole of traditional institutions.

We briefly discussed in the previous classes how it adversely affected the traditional joint family system, and the hold of religion and conventional notions of morality. The Victorian morality in Europe was severely affected with this rise of industrial society and the rise of the individual as not somebody who is completely bounded by the rules of tradition.

Saint Simon envisioned an industrialist state directed by modern science in which universal association should suppress war. He believed that the men who are successfully able to organize society for productive labor are entitled to govern it. So he was quite welcoming this new Industrialist order.

He believed that the people who are taking the lead in this industrial society, who invent new things, who invest new things, who create more wealth, naturally have the right to govern it because he was also really concerned with avoiding social conflict. He was also really concerned with the kind of after effects of French Revolution and the kind of bloodshed that followed.

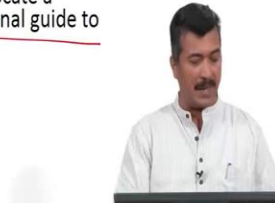
All these scholars were really concerned about bringing in some kind of social order and equilibrium, into the society. Saint Simon believed that in an industrial society, it is the industrial elites who will be able form a state directed by modern science, because modern science, is supposed to give you the kind of objective knowledge about the society.

That objective knowledge must be utilized to govern it efficiently and more peacefully. It must be able to suppress the war. He believed that the men who are successfully able to organize society for productive labor are entitled to government.

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- But he is most important as provisional formulator of an evolutionary organicist theory, whose influence is reflected in social evolutionary doctrines as diverse as those of Herbert Spencer and others.
- Through Durkheim, his organicist concept of social order carries over into contemporary “functionalism” in anthropology and sociology.
- He was also among the earliest to advocate a naturalistic science of society as a rational guide to social reconstruction.



Another very important area of Saint Simon’s contribution is his provisional formulation of what is often called as the evolutionary organicist theory, whose influence is reflected in social evolutionary doctrines as diverse as those of Herbert Spencer and others.

We will come back to this term later in more detail when we discuss Herbert Spencer and even Emile Durkheim to a large extent. This stream of thought that developed during Saint Simon’s time looked at ‘biological characteristics’ of human society.

This was the tendency to compare a human society with a living organism, and try to understand the way in which a living organism and human society have specific structures and how each of these specific structures cater to specific functions and also the whole argument about living species emerging through an evolutionary process. A host of philosophers, including Saint Simon, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer more profoundly argued that there are parallels between the evolution of organisms and evolutions of human society.

This particular argument that there is a an evolutionary organism, that human society can be studied because they share quite a lot of similarities with animal society, both in terms of structure and function, and also through this process of evolution was a very prominent strand of thought during that particular time.

Saint Simon is one of the most important founding fathers of that strand of thought, which kind of evolved into a very important theoretical foundation known as the structural functionalism.

We will talk about that theoretical orientations much later in this course because structure functionalism is widely seen as one of the most important theoretical orientations of modern sociological theory that focuses on the connection between the structure and its function.


Saint Simon is the scholar who laid foundation for this thinking and Durkheim, through his organicist conception of social order carried it over into the contemporary functionalism in anthropology and sociology. Structural functionalism was a very powerful theoretical framework in anthropology as well.

Many of the early anthropologists subscribed to this structural functional school and Indian sociology was heavily influenced by structural functionalism. A host of scholars, most importantly M. N. Srinivas who is considered to be a doyen in the Indian sociological field, was trained under British anthropologists who were specialists in structural functional school.

We see that the initial influence of Saint Simon in the emergence of this particular school of thought. He was also among the earliest to advocate a naturalistic science of society as a rational guide to social reconstruction. This is a point which is quite familiar because we already had quite a lot of discussion about it. The arguments that the natural science provides a model for social science to emerge as a distinct discipline because it is based on observable facts, it is based on verifiability.

It provides you uncontaminated truth. It is not influenced by theology. It is not influenced by metaphysical or philosophical argument. It is based on empirical data. It is more objective. It is more verifiable. It is more impartial. It is neutral. So this argument that social sciences can be modeled after natural sciences also got a major fillip from Saint Simon.


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Social philosophers into sociologists

Inspired by the idea to formulate general laws that govern human society

Critiques of theological and metaphysical thinking, paving way for the later formulation of sociology



To conclude, these scholars represent the phase where there is a transformation from social philosophers to sociologists take place because these people are not strictly sociologists of our time. They represent fascinating scholarship of philosophers who straddled various fields and whose area of interest was quite extensive, starting from philosophy to geography to politics to society to economy, to morals, to ethics.

They were not really confined to a narrower or specialized field called as sociology. And again, as I mentioned, they were heavily inspired by the idea to formulate general laws that govern human society. They wanted to decode these general laws which can be applied across the world just like natural laws just like the law of gravity can be applicable across the world.

They were also critical of theological and metaphysical thinking and paving the way for the later formulation of sociology. These two people Saint Simon and Montesquieu are widely considered to be the some of the most influential thinkers who laid foundations, for the emergence of sociology as a more codified and more structured discipline later. So we will conclude this session now and continue with Auguste Comte in the next class. Thank you.