

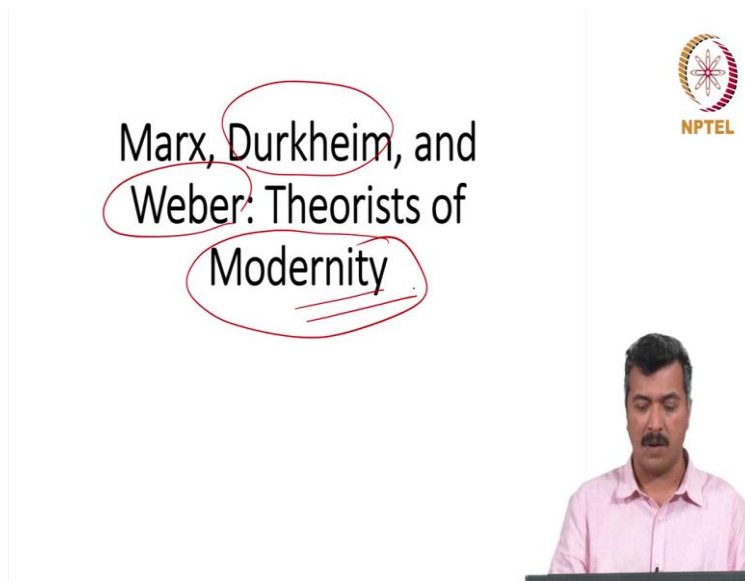
Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture No. 14
Marx, Durkheim, and Weber: Theorists of Modernity

Welcome back to this session. We are beginning a very important section of the course, where we analyse, slightly elaborate and have lengthy discussion on three people, three prominent thinkers of classical sociology ; Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. These three scholars compared to anybody else in the long history of sociology have played the most prominent role in shaping the discipline and they continue to be relevant even now.

While we discussed about Comte and Spencer in the previous class, I mentioned that most of their arguments are now not taken so seriously by sociologists because they represented or they lived in a particular intellectual climate where their ambitions were too broad, there was no specific or specialist discipline called as sociology, they were all kind of a natural philosophers, very broad philosophers who were orienting their philosophical thinking to the field of society. Society as a very distinct area of interest or a society as a very distinct subject matter had not developed then.

But when we come to these people Marx, Durkheim, and Weber undoubtedly we can say that they are the most prominent thinkers and especially Durkheim and Weber, why I am not including Marx is because Marx is not a strict sociologist like the way we understand Durkheim and Weber. Marx was much broader, Marx was much bigger, and he was a gigantic intellectual person, intellectual figure in his capacity. We will have a very detailed discussion about each of these people but let us see what the point of discussing about them together is.


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I discussing the together because I want to connect these theorists as a theorists of modernity. A term that have appeared several times, a term that will appear again in the future classes several times, the term that is extremely important and a fraught one, a term that has given rise to so much of debate even now, the kind of a theoretically debates about modernity. Whether a modernity is singular, there can be multiple modernity, there can be alterative modernities?

What has been the experience of modernity in different places in European colonies? How do we look back to the imposition of certain ideas of modernity? How do we try to regal out of this kind of consider theoretical imposition on them? , the arguments about developing certain paradigms beyond that of colonialism, decolonising attempts. So, this is a very important term and these three thinkers, sociological thinkers are somebody who are the thinkers of modernity.


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- Anthony Giddens describes sociology as the “study of modernity.” A “shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization.”

Modernity as produced by three revolutions

- “a certain set of attitudes toward the world, including the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention.”
- “a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy.”
- “a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy.”



Now, Anthony Giddens is an important and famous British sociologist. He describes sociology as a study of modernity, it is a very important definition because sociology has been defined by different people differently. Durkheim defines it as a study of social facts, Weber defines it as a study of social action whereas, Giddens defines it as a study of modernity, a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization, a very distinct phase where sociology does not look into the past.

Sociology strictly is not the study of the agrarian society, of course you have agrarian sociology or rural sociology emerge as a major theme, but the overall orientation of sociology is the modern society, the industrial society and the society that is evolving in front of us. Now, we have done this discussion but just a recap; modernity as produced by these three revolutions, the great transformations that we discussed in the previous classes that swept across Europe during that particular time from seventeen to eighteenth and nineteenth century.

One of the first revolutions as indicated by Anthony Giddens is a certain set of attitudes towards the world including the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention. A kind of a revolution that completely transformed our idea, our intellect, our intellectual orientation towards our own life as well as that of the world around us.

In other words, this could be identified as enlightenment, as the scientific revolution, the emergence of reason that you do not have to really depend up on the theological or the religious explanation and blindly follow that rather, you have the faculty of reason, the ability to use your reason to make sense of the world and not only to make sense of the world but

also to transform it by human intervention. You can transform the fate of people, you can transform the way people live into a far better way, less violent way, less painful way, in a more emancipatory mode. So, this was one of the most important intellectual movement that happened in Europe what we understand it as enlightenment. We already discussed that in previous lectures.

Second one is a certain range of political institutions including the nation-states and mass democracy as heralded by French revolution. Again we had a slightly detailed discussion about that. So, here people come to realize that a monarchy or a particular lineage of a king, a king and his fore fathers, a king, his son and his son and his son.


Here, there is nothing divine about it, they are not divinely ordained, they are all ordinary people like that and there is nothing divine about a monarchy, despotism and these are just one among the forms of political governance and far more desirable, far more civilized way of governing oneself is that of mass democracy where everybody has a say in how they must be ruled.

We know that this whole idea of democracy why it very glamorous and very glorious, it had very chequered past, this whole idea of universes suffrage that every person is equal, every person gets a vote, and you have an age limit beyond that everybody gets to cast a single vote. And it looks very normal and natural for us, but in order to reach this particular position most of these European countries and countries like America and Australia, they had to fight for decades if not for centuries.


Earlier universal suffrage was only limited to the aristocratic, or it did not simply exist. Voting rights were reserved only the white, for the propertied class. Then only to the men, white propertied men. So, it took so much of struggle, movements, consistent social struggle in order to make it a universal one where everybody whether it is a black or white or poor or rich or man or woman is able to cast their vote, but this was a major turning point.

The third one a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and market economy, something that we discussed again, brought about by industrial revolution, the rise of Capitalism, a completely new mode of economic production where the workers are not bound to their employer in any permanent manner. They are there to sell their thing, the traditional bondages, traditional influences have simply disappear. We discussed it in a sufficient manner. So, these are the three important revolution that gave birth to a particular type of modernity as it unfolded in Europe during that particular time.

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- This great transformation, so profound in its implications, gave sociological theory its reason for existence.
- the discovery of the idea of the “social” or “society.”
- Intellectuals came to recognize the existence of society as a supra-individual entity, a distinct phenomenon having its own “specific characteristics, its constraints and its variables.”
- individuals themselves were products of society and sociology as the study of MODERN SOCIETY



This great transformation, so profound in its implications, gave sociological theory its reason for existence. It is a very powerful statement. So, why did sociology emerge? Sociology emerged because these great transformation produced a particular kind of society, the series of consequences which required a specialist lens to understand without which sociological theory would not have arisen. A sociology would not have been established if all these things did not take place.

So, what led to, was the discovery of the idea of the “social” or “society”. Maybe for the first time in human history, the intellectuals and the thinkers they argue, they realise that there is something called as social or there is something called as society as a distinct subject matter, as a distinct area of study.

This is something very important. I am inviting your attention to some of my earlier classes where we argued that the people who thought about society, the social philosophers must have existed right from the start of human civilization, we had in every civilization thinkers who had spoken so much of things about the social because social is something very part of their life.

But an institutionalised and systematic emergence of this social as a distinct subject matter with a set of theories, with a set of methodological orientations and epistemological basis is something quite unique because this is the time that Europe underwent so much of transformation thereby, a consensus emerged that you require a new disciplinary perspective in order to make sense of that, as you cannot reduce these transformations into economic or political or philosophical or historical things.

Because the transformation that are taking place, changes that are taking place cannot be captured by the existing disciplines or existing theoretical framework. So, that realization led to the emergence of sociology as a new discipline. Intellectuals came to recognize the existence of society as a supra-individual entity, a distinct phenomenon having its own specific characteristics, its constraints and variables. Society is thus understood as a supra-individual entity i.e. something that exists beyond and above the individual. This is a very interesting term, we will come back to that when we discuss Emile Durkheim.

Society is constituted by individuals. If you take away all individual, there is no society. Society is composed of individuals, there has to be a group of people, there has to have some kind of interaction, mutual relation, we discussed that in earlier lectures. But the argument is that while society is constituted by the individuals, society is beyond them, above them, it has its own existence and this an interesting argument, we will come back to that in more detail.



A distinct phenomenon having its own specific characteristics, its constraints and its variables. So, different societies vary, have different characteristics and different forms of constraints. And you need a specialised discipline to understand that.

Individuals themselves were products of society and sociology was considered as a study of Modern Society. Thus, it leads to the argument that an individual is a product of society. The way individual think, the way individuals act, the way individuals identify the world around them, and the way individuals behave in a particular context. These are heavily influenced by the society around them.

So, the argument that individuals are the product of a society was a major argument during that particular time, along with the definition that sociology as a study of this modern society. This is the context in which it was believed that because you cannot reduce, you cannot have your philosophical arguments to study the society the way it functions. You need to have more focused, more empirically grounded arguments and a discipline was required.

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- Marx, Durkheim and Weber are the foremost theorists of modernity
- They lived, experienced and reflected over the rise of modernity
- They applied the principles of science inherited from the Enlightenment to examine the origins, characteristics, and dynamics of modern society.



So, that is the reason why we consider Marx Durkheim and Weber as the foremost theorists of modernity. They are the central pillars of the study of modernity from a sociological point of view. We have set of philosophers who were different, you have Nietzsche, and you have other philosophers who are considered to be very important Kant for example, important philosophers who provided philosophical idea for the understanding of modernity through understanding of reason.

But from a discipline of sociology, they are the most important theorist of modernity, because they lived, they experienced and they reflected over the rise of modernity. They were the people of their times, all this great transformation of Europe happened in front of their eyes, they experienced it, they lived through this process. And this process is tremendously influenced their thinking, they wanted to comprehend the kind of changes. For example, a person like Marx, he was bewildered by the kind of changes that were happening.



They were all personally touched, they were perplexed by the kind of changes that were happening in front of them. They were the men of their time, they were the scholars of their time who very creatively engaged and responded to the kind of changes happening in their life. They applied the principles of science inherited from the enlightenment to examine the origin, characteristics and dynamics of modern society.

So, we discussed it, I feel sufficiently about the impact of scientific thinking on social philosophers. They believed that the scientific method or positivism that has been developed by Comte and others could be used to study the kind of changes that are happening around them.

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Central questions

What are the origins and defining characteristics of the new capitalist or industrial society, how does it differ from the traditional society of the past, through what processes did the transition from the premodern world to the modern world come about, what are the driving forces and developmental tendencies of the emergent industrial society, what is the fate of the individual in the modern age, what new problems and dangers does the era of modernity pose, what does the future hold, and how might we best respond to the radically new circumstances of modern social life?



So they asked a series of central questions. And what were these central questions? All the three scholars or all the three or every social scientists of that time asked these questions in one or the other way. What are the origins and defining characteristics of the new capitalist industrial society? How do they differ from the traditional society of the past? What processes did the transition from the pre-modern world to the modern world come about? What are the driving forces and developmental tendencies of the emergent industrial society?

What is the fate of the individual in the modern age? What new problems and dangers does the era of modernity pose? What does the future hold? How might we best respond to the radically new circumstances of modern social life? These are very important and fascinating questions; Questions which have philosophical and utilitarian philosophical as well as very utilitarian implications, very profound set of questions which helps in understanding the kind of the characteristics of a capitalist industrial society.


The difference between traditional and modern and you must be knowing that this binary posing of traditional versus modern, agriculture versus industrial. This has been a very central feature of sociological thinking. So, they wanted to understand in what way a modern society is different from traditional society and from a pre-modern to the modern. What were the driving forces and also the most interesting is the question of the fate of individual? Where individual emerges as a separate entity.

Individual emerges as an autonomous entity, individual no longer can be subsumed under the label of the community, he or she is no longer a part of a tribe or a community or a village or a caste or a religion. He has to be seen as separate and what is the fate of an individual?


Beautiful, very fascinating discussions follow. And also a new set of problems, new set of issues, so while modernity promised emancipation, modernity promised the breaking down of traditional barriers and traditional shackles.

It also engendered a series of problems which we will discuss of course, all the scholars talk about it elaborately especially Karl Marx talks about it. But these set of questions are very very important.

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- They were also *defenders* of modernity, vehemently opposed to the reactionary currents of their day.
- They neither regretted the demise of traditional society nor dreaded the rise of modern society.
- Even Marx, acknowledged the "civilizing influence of capitalism".
- Durkheim applied the sociological method to make an empirically grounded case in support of industrialization, individualism, intellectualism, and egalitarianism.
- Weber too criticized the romantics aspiring to resurrect aristocratic traditions and literary figures writing in celebration of feudal values and hereditary privileges.



They were also defenders of modernity which is an important point to remember. Unlike say Spencer for example, who had a more conservative kind leaning or Auguste Comte for that matter. They were the kind of active defenders of modernity, vehemently opposed to the reactionary currents of the day.

We know that the whole enlightenment and the whole social reformation did not happen unopposed. It did not happen without any opposition. There were very powerful sections especially the elite sections, especially the clergy class, the priests, the Aristocrats, the wealthy sections, they were very much against these arguments of reformations or arguments of enlightenment.

But these scholars did not joint hands with them, they were very strong defenders of modernity. They neither regretted the demise of traditional society, nor dreaded the rise of modern society. Because for the people who were always in the positions of privilege, for them the laws of the traditional society means the laws of their privilege and the laws of their comforts. And they did not want that. They did not want to hold on to the kind of a traditional

privileges that they were enjoying. A priest for example, a Catholic priest for example might always wanting to enjoy the kind of unquestioned adoration or unquestioned acceptance by his disciples.

This is a very comfortable way of living, very comfortable state to be in. But the ground is shifting and they did not dread the rise of modern society. Even Marx acknowledged the civilizing influence of capitalism. Why this statement is important? Because Marx throughout his life, throughout his intellectual life, wanted to fight and destroy capitalism. But he even while doing so welcomed the transition from feudalism to capitalism. That is an important point. He identified emergence of capitalism as an unavoidable situation, a very welcoming one, a very positive one.

Because for him it marked the transition from the slavery and feudalism to a far better one. While he was extremely critical of that, he wanted a more egalitarian society to come into picture. He was appreciative of that. He talked about the civilizing influence of capitalism. And similarly, Emile Durkheim applied the sociological method to make an empirically grounded case in support of industrialization, individualism, intellectualism and egalitarianism.

So, all these people, Durkheim was deeply committed to some of the important enlightenment ideas of egalitarianism, of treating every individuals as equal as for intellectualism, the primacy of your intellectual ability, the spirit of questioning, the spirit of critical thinking, the spirit of rationality and that of individualism. So, while they wanted to analyse the kind of changes through every scientific point of view, all of them were ideologically inclined to this modern world.