

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 06
Enlightenment

Welcome to this session. In this session, we will discuss very briefly the concept of Enlightenment. We are discussing this concept of Enlightenment not to go deeper into its philosophical or ideological background, but to understand how Enlightenment functioned as a very important background or as a very important factor for the emergence of sociology as a distinct social science discipline in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Europe.

A set of new ideas, a set of new political, economic and cultural processes and a demanding new social reality, all these are important factors behind the emergence of any social science discipline, the case of sociology was not an exception. One of the most important intellectual changes or ideological changes that happened in Europe is widely described by this term, European Enlightenment.

There are very fascinating discussions and debates about the European Enlightenment to what extent they can herald a true idea of human emancipation, and whether different civilizations had anything similar to this idea of Enlightenment and what were the kind of internal contradictions of Enlightenment and how did Enlightenment view certain practices like racism or slavery, or how many of these champions of Enlightenment were heavily racists. Therefore, it is a very fascinating area to look into the kind of discussions and debates about Enlightenment.

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- Emerged in the wake of the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which challenged the dominant philosophical and religious visions of the universe.



- Copernicus and heliocentrism

- Galileo - Inquisitorial commission of the Catholic Church declared heliocentrism to be: "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture." "and yet it moves" ...

- The Enlightenment is often seen as a march of progress, as the rise of reason and science overcoming the superstitions of the Middle Ages.



Enlightenment emerged in the wake of scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which challenged the dominant philosophical and religious visions of the universe. The rise of science and the scientific contributions of Copernicus, Galileo, and a number of important scientists had altered the widely held views and belief systems about the nature of the universe, its creation, its functioning, and the role of earth, the role of sun, and the importance of human beings.

Before that, all these explanations were very convincingly provided by the most powerful religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church. As I mentioned in one of the previous classes, an institution like Catholic Church and its religious theology had a very convincing answer in its own rationality. It does not say that religion cannot provide answer to every question.

Christianity explained the origin of man, the creation of man, it explained the creation of the universe, the creation of the world. It had very convincing answers, and through its institutions, it very systematically imposed these ideas and this set of knowledge across the centuries over generations of population.

One of the most scientists who challenged this argument was Copernicus. His argument about heliocentrism went against the biblical or the Catholic argument or the Christian argument that the earth is the center of the universe.

The Christian church argued that earth is the center of the universe, and all other planets, including the sun, are revolving around earth because earth is a place where human beings

inhabit, and human beings are the most precious creations of God. Therefore everything revolves around the earth and that was their geocentric argument. Copernicus argued that this is a fallacy, rather the earth is revolving around the sun.

And then comes Galileo Galilei, who through his systematic study and through his observation through telescope reaffirmed Copernicus's argument. He argued earth is one among the several satellites that revolve around the sun and there is nothing distinct or there is nothing special about earth as earth is one among different planets that revolve the sun.

As the students of science know, that created quite a lot of controversy. Because these arguments were seen as heretical, and were seen as against the teaching of Bible, they were seen as against the teaching of Christianity, and that was punishable.

At that particular time in history, if you were to talk about a new idea that went against the teachings of Bible or went against the teaching of Christianity, you could be punished. Hence Galileo was subjected to so much of pressure, so much of intimidation, so much of threat, and the church constituted an inquisition committee. He was examined was asked to go back from his argument about heliocentrism.

There is a very interesting statement of this inquisitorial commission of the Catholic Church declared heliocentrism, to be a "foolish and absurd philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture"

What we are discussing now are some of the very, very important very important moments in the human history, where one of the most fundamental lessons of natural science is being ridiculed as foolish and absurd philosophy because it goes against the Holy Scripture.

The Holy Scripture, the Bible was seen as the ultimate source of knowledge about the whole universe. Nobody was allowed to question and say anything contradictory to the arguments or the suggestions of the Holy Scripture. Therefore, Galileo was subjected to the inquisition by the church and was found guilty. He was punished, and punishment was to retract from all his arguments. Initially he was punished for imprisonment, and later it was reduced to house arrest till his death. And he died in his house.

There is a very interesting story that even when this sentence was given, he mentioned in a very mute voice that "and yet it moves". This is supposed to be a very important episode.

‘And yet it moves’, mean yet the earth moves around the sun, arguing that your judgment or your punishment on me will not stop this truth and you cannot cover it or erase it for long.

Enlightenment, while it derives its outlook from this scientific revolutions, especially that of scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo, also benefit from the whole interventions of Charles Darwin, who revolutionized the whole idea about the evolution of human beings that completely went against the teachings of Christianity. The teachings of Christianity that established that human beings were the most special creations of God and woman was created from the rib of the man.

These belief systems which were perpetuated, which were believed, disseminated, institutionalized for the past so many centuries, were now refuted and challenged by this man, Charles Darwin, through his work evolution. His work on evolution convincingly argued on the basis of evidences that human beings were not created all on a sudden, rather every animal and plant species in this world are the product of a process called evolution, and there is nothing divine about it.

These scientific discoveries completely shook the foundation of religious explanation of knowledge. This particular development played a very important and pivotal role in the emergence of sociology as a discipline. Enlightenment is often seen as a march of progress, as the rise of reason and the science overcoming the superstitions of middle Ages. Therefore, this is a very important point, because we talked about this concept of reason and science and how it was trying to overcome the superstitions existed in middle Ages.

So, a group of intellectuals began to emerge in Europe, arguing that many of the hitherto held belief systems about the universe, about human beings about the world, especially those sanctioned and propagated by religion, are nothing but superstitions and unfounded beliefs.

These unfounded beliefs need to be replaced with the knowledge that is produced by the reason and science. So, you see the decline of a particular religious paradigm as an explanatory platform. And you see the emergence of science and reason as an alternative platform and as an alternative system of knowledge.

The kind of conflict between religion and science becomes very important during this particular period. That conflict later lead to the decline of religion, which very famously known in sociological literature as the process of secularization, meaning how religion lost its significance in the public sphere, in the society, in politics, in social aspects in everything.

Therefore, this is seen as a fundamental conflict between science and religion, and the explanatory potential of religion as a paradigm to explain about the worldly things, about the universe was very significantly dented by the rise of science and reason.

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- a new perception of an orderly universe, which was governed by natural laws of motion and gravity rather than spirits. Science could grasp these laws in mathematical form. There was no need for a divine purpose to explain the workings of nature. The natural world became subject to humankind's prediction and will.

- committed to the idea of an empirical science. A reliable understanding of the world, they insisted, could only be attained through experience, observation, and experimentation.

- Opposition to Catholic Church and its interpretations of the world



These enlightenment thinkers argued for the use of reason to analyze and understand the universe and the world around them, rather than blindly accepting the reasoning of religion and tradition. As you know, there is a very close connection between religion and tradition. Every religion has a religious tradition comprises if a set of rules and practices, which are supposedly considered to be constant and supposedly contains some of the most essential elements of this religion.

Many of these traditions were protected and considered very important and essential because they were religiously sanctioned and one could not change them. Therefore, challenging this religious traditions was considered to be a major offense and a sin. Against all these widely believed systems and convictions, there are a set of people who now argue that you need to use reason and to analyze and understand the universe and the world around them, rather than blindly accepting the reasoning of religion and tradition.

This introduced a new perception of an orderly universe, which was governed by natural laws of motion and gravity rather than spirit. Science could grasp these laws in mathematical form. There was no need for a divine purpose to explain the working of nature. The natural world became subject to humankind's prediction and will. This realization was a moment of tremendous sense of empowerment.

This particular realization that there are natural laws and these laws are governing the planetary motions and the universe, and we can make sense of them, and understand them has brought important changes. The idea that we do not need to depend upon the clergy or the priests or so called holy books to know the truths about the universe and they have very little to offer in order to make sense of the functioning of universe was completely new in terms of outlook.

The natural world becomes a subject of humankind's prediction and will. You can predict how the world will evolve and you can understand a lot of things, you can move and control a lot of things.

This was a moment of tremendous sense of empowerment, a new sense of power, new sense of knowledge where you can use your intellect and wisdom in order to make sense of the world, because there are natural laws, which are intelligible to human beings and by understanding these natural laws, you can deal with them better.

And thereby, it was an open call to argue that this the religion is of very limited use. Maybe religion has some relevance to the questions of spirituality, individual issues or organizing the social aspects, but beyond that religious contribution are irrelevant in understanding the world and the universe. The relevance of religion in the realm of science was seen as either minimal or almost nil.

This led to the commitment to the idea of an empirical science. As we mentioned in the previous session, the idea of empiricism talks about the ability of human beings to understand his world around him through the senses. A reliable understanding of the world, they insisted, could only be attained through experience, observation and experimentation. It is the most fundamental component and the most important feature of science that you observe, you experience, you collect data, you classify them, you experiment with them, and you prove the hypothesis and then you reach to a conclusion.

The scientific method that combines positivism and empiricism were widely heralded as the most suitable, or perhaps the only way of understanding the world. That again, resulted in a major conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, because it came as a very serious challenge to the existing positions and powers of the Church.

Roman Catholic Church was not only a religious institution, it was also a political institution. A combination of these two deadly forces religious power as well as political power, made

Roman Catholic Church an extremely powerful institution. Therefore, it was not very easy to fight the influence of Roman Catholic Church. However, soon, it became very clear that the church has very little to offer to resist or to criticize the emergence of the increasing influences and expansion of the field of science and expansion of scientific and technological advancement

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- The philosophers were “practical social reformers,” seeking knowledge “above all for the sake of its utility.” They were confident that the findings of science could be employed to improve the human condition.
- This vision implied a conception of the world as malleable, capable of being rearranged to align more closely with the dictates of reason and the requirements of human welfare. Commitment to a better society and idea of progress.
- A group of philosophers including Voltaire, Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, John Locke and Immanuel Kant



What are the consequences of these scientific revolutions into the field of society, or how did this emergence of reasoning and empiricism and a kind of a scientific methodology and the newfound sense of empowerment that you can understand the world by your own sense and intellect influence social sciences?

These enlightenment philosophers were “practical social reformers,” seeking knowledge “about all for the sake of its utility.” They were confident that the findings of science could be employed to improve human condition. There was consensus that you can improve the conditions of humanity and can make the lives of people far better. You can uplift the living standards of people and can make them freer. You can ‘emancipate’, which is the most important idea.

These philosophers dreamt about emancipation of large populations and they argued that these people can be free of the shackles and the chains. That was the period of transition from medieval feudalism to that of capitalism and large vast sections of people were bondages of feudalism.

Many of these philosophers believed that, vast majority of people were under the chains of religion and the chains of church, who are blindly following certain unfounded principles. So, they argued that this scientific revolution can be used for the betterment of people. There was a major concern about the betterment of human beings, and about elevating the states of human beings to make them lead a far better life through the emancipation of humankind.

This vision implied a conception of the world as malleable, capable of being rearranged to align more closely with the dictates of reason and the requirements of human welfare. Commitment to a better society and ideas of progress.

As I told you this feeling of empowerment gives you the possibility of changing the world as per your ideas. This comes against many of the teachings of the church or many of the teachings of almost every religion that argues that the world is like this, because God created it so and you are suffering because God want you to suffer. You are suffering from poverty, you are suffering from illness, and you are suffering from oppression because that is how it is.

A quite a lot of theoretical explanations about human suffering and exploitation, about the existence of different classes, consider it to be the most noble and natural vast majority of them are suffering under this kind of social order which was seen as divinely sanctioned. It was seen as ordered by the God. In this context, the new argument suggest that you can change the society as per your conviction as per your reason marking a decisive critique of the status quo.

It completely challenged these arguments of religion, especially that of Christianity. This sense of empowerment informed not only the intellectuals, but also the ordinary people. It convinced lot of people that that the world is malleable, you can shape it the way you want, you can fashion it the way you want, you can orient it the way you want. You can create a more better and humane society. You can create a society where inequalities are at its minimum and where large number of people do not suffer in their everyday life.

This sense of idea emerges from the argument that the world can be understood by your human consciousness and human intellect. That provided a major impetus to the study of society and it gave so much of momentum and enthusiasm, not only to the philosophers who led this moment, but also it slowly percolated down to the ordinary population.

A group of philosophers including Voltaire, Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, a number of them, the, the list of, you know Enlightenment thinkers are very, very long, I have just selectively put a very important numbers. So, these scholars include, say political scientists and philosophers Voltaire, Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith and David Hume, they were economists, and Immanuel Kant is a philosopher.

A group of scholars cutting across disciplines agreed upon some of the most important arguments that the existing world order and existing situation can be changed for something better. They were not very clear about what constitute 'better', but there was an idea that we can definitely take the society to a far better position.

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- Most philosophers tended to be utilitarians, in that they thought that everyone had natural desires to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.
- Many economists advocated the elimination of government and customary regulation of the economy, allowing the free market, through the "invisible hand," to maximize everyone's self-interest and the good of society as a whole.
- Advocates of social contract theory in political science



Most enlightenment philosophers, especially in the fields of political science tend to be utilitarian, where they thought that everyone has natural desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This idea significantly informed the emergence of economic theories during this particular time. According to this idea, there is nothing wrong in trying to maximize the pleasure and to minimize the pain. For that, human beings need to enter into some kind of a contractual agreement which imply the rise of social contract theory that is predominant in enlightenment political and economic thinking.

Many economists advocated the elimination of the government and its customary regulation of the economy, allowing the free market through the idea of “invisible hand,”, argued by Adam Smith in order maximize everyone's self-interest and to have a good of society as a whole.

The economic philosophy David Hume and then Adam Smith come from this kind of an argument that the government in their time, such as the monarchical or dictatorial kind of government must recede, must lose its significance. The market must be allowed to freely work as per its own logic and dynamics. In that way, people are able to pursue their passion and desires and get their self-interest is fulfilled, and as a whole, it is good for the society.

You will find its implication in political science with the rise of social contract theory, where the basic argument is that if everybody needs to live together, they need to have certain kind of contract with each other and also with the state. This new kind of consciousness and understanding about the world in which we live and about the universe had enormous

implications on every distinct fields of life, whether it is political or social or economic or philosophical. There was no sphere of society that was untouched by the arguments of Enlightenment.

This is a very brief introduction to this huge fascinating topic, but I hope that it must have given you some basic idea about how Enlightenment functioned as a catalyst in the emergence of sociology as a new science. We will wind up here and then meet you for the next class. Thank you.