

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 07
Emergence of Nation-state and French Revolution

Welcome back to the class, and we are continuing our discussion about the Emergence of Sociology in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. In the last classes, we were discussing a series of factors that provided a very compelling context and a set of reasons for the emergence of sociology during that particular historical context.

Let me also reiterate the point that, for a discipline to emerge as something new, especially a discipline like social science requires a very compelling context. A host of socio-economic, political and cultural factors are necessary for the emergence of a set of theoretical formulations and methodological orientations which later gets consolidated as a discipline.

When you look at these major changes, the great transformation that swept across Europe during this definitive period in its history, in terms of the political realm, and political sphere of society, two important factors emerged to the fore, they are the emergence of nation-state and the French Revolution.

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- The nation-state arose with the expansion of capitalism. State replaced the city as the major center of power and commerce.
- Capitalism could only gain world power in the context of a new state system which provided a structure of law and the fiscal guarantees of a peaceful social environment.
- Economic compulsion and workplace surveillance replaced direct coercion as the primary practices of controlling labor.
- States became larger and more powerful. They created stable monetary systems which promoted the buying and selling of land and the establishment of wage labour.



Now, we are all familiar that nation-states are one of the most prevalent and important form of political organizations. But we must know that this form of political organization in the

form of a nation-state is of a very recent origin. It has not been the kind of way in which we decide, the human beings decided to organize themselves throughout the history.

The nation-state arose with the expansion of capitalism and state replaced the city as a major center for power and commerce. There is a very close connection between the expansion of capitalism and the emergence of nation state and the state replaced the city as the major center of power and commerce.

In earlier kingdoms and empires, it was the cities that were the nerve center of commerce and merchandise activities, but with the expansion of nation-states, it became the unit of these economic activities and played a very important role in the emergence of capitalism.

Why is it that there is a very close connection between capitalism and nation-states? Why capitalism also became the most prominent form of economic activity, along with the emergence of nation-states? Is there any relationship between these two? The transformations were occurring both in the economic as well as political realm. Scholars were of the very firm opinion that for capitalism to emerge as an institutionalized and important economic form, then you must have the character of a nation-state in its political realm. They would argue that capitalism could only gain world power in the context of a new state system which provided a structured law and the fiscal guarantees of a peaceful social environment. This is something very important, what is it that a nation-state has to offer why and how it provides a stable environment of investment for entrepreneurs, factory owners, merchants and for all the stakeholders who are involved in the economic activity.

Now, there is a structure of law and the legal system is well entrenched. It is not based on the whims and fancies of the ruler and there is a disconnection between the ruler and the set of laws, so that the ruler cannot change the set of rules as per his desires. There is also an established legal system and a fiscal guarantee of a peaceful social environment. As a result of these, there is an all-powerful political system which ensures that a more or less peaceful social environment prevail. This kind of a guarantee is something very important for capitalism as a mode of economic organization to emerge.

There are also arguments that economic compulsion and workplace surveillance replaced direct coercion as the primary practices of controlling labor. The workplace surveillance and the direct logic of capitalism emerged as a sufficiently powerful mechanism to control and extract the maximum labor from the labor force so that you need not punish them physically,

you need not threaten them, you need not use your brute force, but the very economic rationale of modern capitalist system compelled the workers to work maximum.

We will discuss these in the coming classes when we discuss sections on Karl Marx and others. So, the state became larger and more powerful, they created stable monetary systems, which promoted the buying and selling of land and the establishment of wage labor. These are the kind of structural relationships between the political system as well as the economic system. The establishment of stable monetary systems and a peaceful and overarching power of the state played an important role in economic activities including say, buying and selling of land and other aspects.

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- As the nation-state became the accepted political form after sixteenth century, it enforced a statutory monopoly over a delimited territory and rule sanctioned by law.
- The rise of the market demanded these stable institutions of rule and law, so that the entrepreneurship and long-term investment vital for capitalism could take place.
- The expansion of capitalism was dependent on the centralization of violence in the modern state, as the police controlled populations internally while governments provided the military support for capitalist expansion abroad.



As the nation-state became the accepted political form after sixteenth century, it enforced a statutory monopoly over a delimited territory and rule sanctioned by law. We understand modern nation state as a political entity has absolute sovereign power over a specific delimited territorial area. This form of centralization of power was something very important for the emergence and fruitful functioning of the capitalist system.

It also led to the rise of the market which demanded these stable institutions of rule and law, so that the entrepreneurship and long term investment vital for capitalism could take place. This is done to instill confidence in the minds of entrepreneurs and capitalists, so that they establish factories, employ people. The political climate of peace and trust are something very important for capitalism as a system of economic activity to take shape.

The expansion of capitalism was dependent on the centralization of violence in the modern state, as the police controlled populations internally, while government provided the military support for capitalist expansion abroad. This is one of the important insights about how aspects of violence associated with the modern state is in many ways helpful for the capitalist expansion. We know that, one of the very important features of modern nation state is that it alone has the legitimate power of using violence; state alone has the ability to use legitimate violence over its citizens. So, every state ensures that it uses the police force to control its internal population, while it also provides military support for capitalist expansion abroad.

This was extremely important in the colonial context, as you must be knowing that the major European countries fought relentlessly over several centuries for the control of different colonies in different parts of the world i.e. in Asia, in Africa and Latin America. The nation-states could really do this dual function of controlling its internal population, as well as providing a military support for the capitalist expansion abroad so that new markets and new places can be identified from where raw materials can be sourced.

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The French Revolution (1789)



- One of the most significant political events in the modern era
- Overthrow of the feudal estate system where the King exploited the vast majority of commoners of the third estate with the help of the clergy and nobility who occupied the first and second estate respectively.
- The year 1789 witnessed an extraordinary phenomenon: a population rising up and transforming what was previously assumed to be the natural order of things.



Along with the emergence of nation-state as a very predominant form of political organization, one of the most important incidents or episodes in the European history was the French Revolution that began in 1789, and went on for next ten years. It is considered as one of the most significant political events not only in Europe, but in the whole world because of the ramifications of French Revolution and its consequences, its reverberations which became very evident in the later political processes, not only in Europe, but across the world.

Thus, it is extremely important for us to understand, what were the connections between French Revolution and the emergence of sociology? How did a particular incident, a particular political development provided an important impetus for the emergence of a discipline like sociology. You must be knowing what exactly happened in French Revolution, I am not going into the detail. It actually is the overthrow of the feudal estate system where the king exploited the vast majority of commoners of the third estate, with the help of the clergy and nobility, who occupied the first and second estate respectively.

Here, we are talking about the specific type of social organization that existed in France during that particular time, known as estate system comprising of three estates, the clergy, the nobility, commoners and the king used the first two estates, basically to exploit the ordinary people who represented the vast majority of the population. After a series of political developments, there was a mass uprising where people they took up an armed revolution and they guillotined and beheaded King Louie XVI and his wife, and it had a bloody end.

Though Napoleon Bonaparte took over after the French Revolution, it did not really succeed in all its stated claims because it did not lead to a kind of an immediate democracy, in that sense French Revolution was only a partial success. But the kind of consequences and the kind of premises on which the French Revolution took place had a very significant long lasting impact and impression all over the world.

The year 1789 witnessed an extraordinary phenomenon, a population rising up and transforming what was previously assumed to be natural order of things. One of the most important aspects of French revolution is that the things which were earlier considered to be natural order of things i.e. which were immutable and unchangeable, like political arrangement or social arrangements were now seen as brittle and things that can be overthrown. This particular kind of an understanding that the monarchy or a set of rulers or the hereditary system of kings where a king becomes the Emperor, and then his son becomes the king and that lineage continues, and nobody else can occupy that particular place, majority of the people are exploited by this handful of few, the kind of a religious explanation providing legitimacy to these particular systems. , all these factors or all these processes were seen as natural. Then suddenly, you realize that these things can be overthrown and a completely different system, a completely different political order, much more humane and much better ideals can be established. This is something very important in terms of what happened during the French Revolution.

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- It was a revolt against royal despotism, hereditary privilege, and economic oppression and a revolt in the name of democratic government, political equality, and human rights.
- Idea became prominent that the old social order could be swept away in a revolutionary act, and society could be remade according to the dictates of reason.
- The Revolution affected the entire social structure of France, abolishing customary relations between the classes. The French Revolution invented the idea of political rather than religious revolution as the vehicle for fundamental social change, indeed a way to achieve salvation in this world.



So, it was a revolt against royal despotism, hereditary privilege, and economic oppression and a revolt in the name of democratic government, political equality, and human rights.

If royal despotism, hereditary privilege and economic oppression were the order of the day, if they were the very established ways in which people were living for centuries, then you realize that they can be replaced with far better forms of arrangement, in the name of democratic government, where everybody irrespective of your economic position, irrespective of whether you are a landed person or you are a landless person, whether you are educated or whether you are not educated, whether you are a man or a woman, or a white or a black, irrespective of all these social markers, you are able to take part in this democratic process.

You have a say in your own governance and the most important aspect is the ideal about political equality where everybody is equal and there is no distinction on the basis of birth. You must be knowing that these are very revolutionary arguments in a traditional society like medieval France where the social distinctions on the basis of birth was very important.

Above all these ideas of human rights which may not have developed then the way we understand it today, but the idea that everybody has equal rights or everybody must be treated equally or human beings have certain innate rights were very important in all these discourses.

Now a particular set of revolutionary ideas that have quite a lot of emancipatory potential are emerging. With these kinds of ideas, you are confronting an age old oppressive and

exploitative system. So, the idea became prominent that the old social order could be swept away in a revolutionary act and society could be remade according to the dictates of the reason. Again, we are coming back to the idea of reason, because European enlightenment is seen as the era where the reason is brought to the forefront.

We discussed in the previous class, how human reason and human intelligence was seen as a very important resource to understand the way in which the universe function by completely setting aside or by completely dismissing the theoretical explanation of the world. People and scientists argued that you can use reason, human intelligence to understand the way the universe functions. Similarly, the argument now taken are from the field of Natural Sciences and Physical Sciences but also applicable in the realm of society.

Hence, the argument is that you can use the dictates of reason and your own logical thinking in order to remold the society the way you want, and that too, through a revolutionary act, a very swift act. One do not need to wait for centuries for the very gradual changes to take place. If there is a popular rising, these drastic, overwhelming and complete transformation can be brought in a very short period of time.

With the French Revolution, the term revolution became a powerful one which began to influence the imaginations of quite a lot of political activities, because it was something quite promising as you are able to bring in complete and absolute transformation in a society within a very short period of time.

Whether it is violent or not, was not the kind of concern that most of these people had. So, all the social order could be swept away in a very short and very effective revolutionary act. As a result, the revolution affected the entire social structure of France, abolishing customary relationship between the classes.

The whole estate system i.e. old, traditional system, which has both socio political and economic underpinnings were collapsed. The French Revolution invented the idea of political rather than religious revolution as a vehicle for fundamental social change the kind of arguments by the church, clergy that the change is possible but only through the platform of religion only by listening to the arguments and advices of the clergy is just completely dismissed. There is also a very powerful argument, indeed, a way to achieve salvation in this world. This is an extremely important point because they argued that at least quite a lot of scholars and then philosophers who belong to this period argued that, you do not need to

really wait for a salvation after your death, the promise of heaven, we are not sure whether it exists or not, whether it is real or not. But more importantly, you must work to establish a heaven in this world, a heaven in your lifetime, not after your death. So, they promise the kind of salvation in this world, not in the other world, not in the world after your death. It was in a sense a major process of secularization, where the idea of salvation was secularized.

The idea of your salvation, your elevation, the ideas of your attaining eternal peace, all these things were subjected to very significant reformulation, redefinition by these scholars by saying that if you need to be redeemed, to attain salvation, then it has to take place in this world, during your lifetime. You do not need to be convinced, brainwashed by the clergy, by the priest who would promise you salvation and then eternal bliss after your death, because they are only the promises without foundations. This particular class has been brainwashing you over the centuries by these kind of arguments which do not have any basis.

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- It accelerated the centralization of the government, while promoting the notion that the people had the right to participate in their own society and government.
- The French Revolution inspired other democratic uprisings in much of Europe throughout the nineteenth century, and made issues of democracy central components in political discussions.
- It promulgated the idea of popular sovereignty, a powerful “new principle of political legitimacy.” And it left an inspiring and world-changing legacy in the form of enduring and deeply felt democratic and egalitarian aspirations.



French revolution accelerated the centralization of government, while promoting the notion that the people have the right to participate in their own society and government. We just discussed this briefly a couple of minutes earlier, the argument that every ordinary person has the right to participate in their own government and the system.

They are not the mere recipients, passive recipients of a political system that is appointed traditionally, chosen traditionally by somebody, which is claimed to be having a kind of a divine approval. All these ideas were summarily rejected, and it was argued that every person has the right to participate in their own society and government.

The French Revolution inspired other democratic uprising in much of the Europe throughout the nineteenth century. As I told you, even if the French Revolution was only a partial success, it did not lead to a kind of a full blown democracy in France, because Napoleon took over the reins of France immediately after that, and made issues of democracy central component of political discussions.

But we also know that with these kind of examples that at revolution, a movement even if it is a failure in a particular sense of the world, its impact has to be evaluated in a different manner. How do you evaluate the impact of a particular social movement? How do you evaluate the impact of particular incident, the revolutionary act? We cannot really limit our analysis immediately towards the particular incident, but its resonance should be analyzed for a much longer period in time. So, a French example, French Revolution is a classic example

in that sense. It promulgated the idea of a popular sovereignty, a powerful “new principle of political legitimacy.”

It left an inspiring and world-changing legacy in the form of enduring and deeply felt democratic and egalitarian aspirations. This could be one of the most important contributions of French Revolution i.e. its kind of institutionalized democratic and egalitarian aspirations. It is a phenomenal point that you are able to convince a large section of ordinary population that their aspirations for equality and political right is legitimate.

They are not a set of people who have to be governed by somebody else all through and there is nothing divine and religious about it, but rather they have the right to aspire for a very genuine share, they have the right to aspire for their own participation in deciding their destiny, both in terms of social and political life. These are these reasons why French Revolution is still considered as one of the most important watershed moments in the history of world where these set of revolutionary ideas with the kind of liberating potential with emancipator potential were wide spread wide across the society and they were institutionalized and became legitimate. This is the reason why they are talking about it in the new language of political legitimacy.

This particular incident, though it happened early in Europe, it played a very important role in bringing forth a series of ideas, a set of arguments, an enhanced notion of rights, a kind of assertive notions of rights across the European countries, and of course later throughout the world.

Hence, the rise of nation-state, and this particular incident of French Revolution played a very significant role in completely altering the political culture of Europe, which again, was an extremely important political context in which a discipline like sociology began to emerge. We will continue the discussion. Thank you.