

## Unit 1

# Social Theory and its Context

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### Learning objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to

- describe the context of social theory
- discuss the role of Comte, Marx Weber, and Durkheim
- describe some early British social theorists
- assess the role of context in the rise of social theory.

## 1.1 Introduction

Sociological theories are embedded in a particular social context, and are deeply influenced by them. Each sociological thinker or theorist has to respond to the social situation in which he or she exists and to try and make sense of the enveloping culture. That is to say that sociological theory is the sociologist's response to the context in which he lives and works. This truism will become increasingly apparent as you study the unit. However, it needs to be pointed out that there is an inner context and an outer context. The interplay between these two interrelated arenas of living creates sociological theory. The inner context is the background and mind-set of the theorist and also the strong influences and ideas that motivate a thinker to become a social theorist. The outer context is the overall environment, social and physical that the society is embedded in. However this is not to say that similar contexts cannot or do not produce competing theories. Social Theory and its Development thus take place in a particular social and psychological setting. We now give a description of the overall social context in which sociological theory developed. As is well known sociology developed first in the west and it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it percolated to India.

The French Revolution in 1789 created such an urgent context that it became an important element to create a need for sociological theorising. Thus the French Revolution gave rise to many changes in that society. These changes were beneficial in the main but these were also problematic. One of these problems was the law and order maintenance in France. Some thinkers even advocated that law and order in France after the revolution was worse than what existed in the Medieval Ages. Not surprisingly the major theorists like Comte and Durkheim were deeply concerned with law and order.

Apart from the revolution in France we find another source of stimulation to the thinkers. This was the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The industrial revolution was a series of developments that changed the mainly agrarian based economies to those depending on the factory or industrial system. Factory jobs were readily available in the town and there was a shift away from the countryside into industrial jobs. Not only this we find that everything had begun being influenced by rapid technological changes. These, themselves required large bureaucracies to control and give direction to the emerging capitalism, with a premise of free trade or laissez - faire. The problem with this situation was that social inequality began to become extremely disparate and while the factory owners (or capitalists) earned large profits the workers got painfully low wages. The fact of low wages led to the creation of trade unions and also to movements trying to overthrow the capitalist system itself. Thus the industrial revolution, the related capitalist structure, and the reaction against them, were enormous and these affected social thinkers greatly and we find that Marx, Weber and Durkheim were preoccupied with the problematics they unleashed.

## 1.2 Prominence of Socialism

Another series of factors which created a great deal of reaction was the coming into prominence of socialism. This was a direct critique of capitalism and was supported by some thinkers while a majority of them were suspicious indeed hostile to it. The main figure who supported socialism among the sociologists was Karl Marx who was not only an effective writer but also a political activist. In his political activism he was different from the armchair social theorists who were against socialism. That is they wanted to improve and streamline the capitalist systems defects, like the creation of alienation among factory workers (masterfully depicted in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*). They did not feel that socialism was in any way an answer or solution to the ills of capitalism. It has been pointed out that Marx's socialism was often seen as a counterpoint from which to develop different theories. Now, due to the industrial revolution there were great movements of people from the rural to urban locales. These phenomena of migrations partly due to the opening up of jobs in urban areas yet this meant adjusting to the new lifestyle urban areas also saw negative factors entering into the picture, such as pollution, overcrowding, inadequate transport systems, disparities in income and so on. As a matter of fact this impacted on the religious system also with a plethora of cults coming up and some of these even predicted the 'end of the world' in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this did not happen. It was not surprising that early sociologists wanted to emulate the physical and biological sciences in order to get them recognition, prestige and create popularity for sociology.

### Box 1.1: Context of Social Theory

We have seen something of the outer context of social theory and we would do well to see how and in which ways the thinkers who were affected by these massive changes began to start theorising within the ambit of the social environment. We now turn to the role of ideas and the relationship these have in the development of social theory. We begin with the impact of ideas during the Enlightenment in France first. During the Enlightenment many new ideas were introduced and replaced existing ideas. Philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and science were the major moving factors which influenced the thinkers/intellectuals of France. Some names associated with this included

thinkers like Descartes and Locke. Later thinkers did not reject the grand systems of these thinkers but sought out ground reality instead so that ideas could have social relevance. This was very important if sociology itself was to have relevance and a presence in the analysis of society and social concerns, and bring about changes leading to social benefits spreading out to all segments of society. However, the liberalism of the Enlightenment had its own critics or what is called the 'Counter- Enlightenment' and it was the interplay between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment which made possible all the ideas and theorising of early sociology.

Thus for example the counter Enlightenment ideologues, like De Bonald wanted a return to medieval times where they felt life and living was far more harmonious than the Enlightenment. Such writers were against any progressive ideology and felt that both the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution were forces that destroyed peace, harmonies, law and order (Ritwer 1996, pp:1-36). In other words De Bonald was against anything that disturbed patriarchy and the monarchy in France.

### 1.3 Individual vs Collectivity

Thus while the thinkers of the Enlightenment emphasised the person/individual the reaction of those who opposed these thinkers wanted to emphasise the collectivity. Thus these thinkers wanted to point out that there was more to existence than the individual, and this was society itself. Society was viewed as one long flow from past to present and onward to the future. Further, we find that roles and relationships along with organisations were the important aspects. Again "wholeness" was vital aspect emphasising that the parts of a society were interrelated. Further, the conservative reaction abhorred social change which it felt was disruptive and could lead to societal disorder. Thus the view of institutions was wholly uncritical. Therefore, while change was leading forward to a new world the conservative reaction supported hierarchical structures, and felt it to be essential for the system of status and remuneration. These were some of the essential features that existed and had to be faced by the 'liberals'(those with the Enlightenment, that is having a positive view of both the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution). Let us now turn briefly to some of the sociologists of the Enlightenment.

### 1.4 Comte and The Enlightenment

Comte's (1798-1857) pioneering work in Sociology (a term he coined) comprised partly an analysis and reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Thus Comte's "positive philosophy" was aimed at what he felt to be a counter to that he considered to be the ill effects of the Enlightenment. His own approach was influenced by various counterrevolutionary thinkers such as De Bonald. Comte was, however, different from these counterrevolutionaries and he ruled out a regression to the medieval times because science had advanced too much to make that possible. On the other hand he developed an excellent theoretical system, much better than anyone else at that time.

Thus Comte's sociology of "social physics" or what he called sociology was developed as a counter to the social anarchy unleashed in France after the Revolution. He wanted to build sociology after the rigorous approach of

science especially physics. Comte's was an evolutionary theory which comprised a law which has three ascending steps or 'stages' which have a claim to universality that is they apply to all societies.

Thus in this theory we have first the

- 1) Theological stage (circa 1300) in which supernatural powers, and religious icons are the most important factors impacting on society, and even the world is believed to be a product of God
- 2) The metaphysical stage (circa 1300-1800) was one in which "nature" was held to explain everything about man and society.
- 3) The positivistic stage (1800-) came next and was fundamentally influenced by science, and the laws that it discovered. Thus there was no God or nature in this stage so far as explanations are concerned. Comte's position is that it is intellectual confusion that leads to social anarchy. According to him to positivistic stage dominates only when even the traces of the theological and metaphysical stages have been finally reduced if not completely eliminated from society. Only then would order prevail and the evolutionary scheme be proved correct.

Since Comte's position was evolutionary it is clear that he did not believe in violent type of revolutions (Lenzer, 1975).

#### Reflection and Action 1.1

Discuss and describe Comte's evolutionary scheme for the progression of society.

We can mention some other aspects of his work and this includes his observations on social structure and social change. Comte stressed the inter-relatedness of all the components of a society. He also believed that consensus in society was a major requirement. Further he did not believe in the exploitative view of the production processes i.e. capitalists and workers. Comte further recommended that there was a need for theorising and also of research. Finally Comte as a sociologist believed that sociology would ultimately emerge as a dominant force due to its excellence in understanding social processes.

## 1.5 Durkheim and The Enlightenment

We now turn to Durkheim (1858-1917) as the sociologist who took on the mantle from Comte who was his predecessor. Durkheim believed unlike Comte that the Enlightenment was not all negative but in fact did have some positive aspects such as emphasis on scientific method. Durkheim was against anarchy and social chaos, and large portions of his work deal with studies of social order which he felt was the need of the hour.

Durkheim was a prolific writer and wrote many classical works in sociology. Thus in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) he stressed that sociology is the study of "social facts." These social facts are such that they are *external* to and *coercive* of individuals in society. This emphasis of study had a great influence on other sociologists. He demonstrated the usefulness of this approach in his study of *Suicide* (1897) in which he showed how social forces have an impact on individuals and their actions within society. His emphasis however, was not on the individual but the social causes behind it. He was keen to study differences in the suicide rate in different social

categories and groups (e.g. groups, regions, countries). According to Durkheim it was the variations within the social facts which explained different rates of suicide in different groups. Durkheim enunciated two types of social facts (a) material and (b) non material. Material facts (bureaucracy, law) differ from non material facts (social institutions and culture) and it was the latter that Durkheim focused upon in most of his work.

### Box 1.2: The Division of Labour

In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) Durkheim tried to pin down the various factors which acted as the binding glue of society. He felt that early or nascent societies had a moral basis for being integrated, and this was what he called the collective conscience. However, the more advanced society had a relatively weak collective conscience and was held together through a complex division of labour which interconnected members of society. This was, however, not without its problems and was at best a measure that had an interim effect. Nevertheless Durkheim's solution to the problems inherent in the division of labour was to suggest social reforms which could redress imbalances and keep the system going on functioning.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* 1912/1965 Durkheim studied a primitive society so that he could find religion in a primitive form. In doing this the research would also shed light on religion in the modern world. For Durkheim society itself is the basis for religion itself. This insight implied that Durkheim was for the status quo so far as society is concerned for "society as God" is sacred and cannot be over thrown only ameliorated.

Durkheim's work ensured that sociology had made a place for itself in France by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Durkheim in 1898 set up a scholarly journal called "L'annee Sociologique" which was very successful in promoting the Durkheimian brand of sociology to the other schools and academics. Thus the context of the French Revolution and the rise of industrialisation met with an academic response in the shape of Durkheim's analysis of society. After Durkheim there was a plethora of his students and disciples who carried on the work. Thus with Durkheim and his disciples sociology rose in stature and had begun to be widely accepted in France, as a distinctive discipline.

## 1.6 The Marxian Ideology

Let us now turn to sociology in Germany in the same span of time. In Germany there was since the beginning a distinction between Marx and Weber and other sociologists. Thus Karl Marx (1818-1883) was himself deeply influenced by Hegel (1770-1831) but was to later contradict him. While some disciples remained with Hegel's ideas others began to criticize his system.

Hegel's philosophy emphasised the 'dialectic' and 'idealism' of which the latter was a second concept. Thus dialectic itself provides a view of the world as well as an 'image' of the world. Thus the dialectic stresses the great importance of processes including those of conflict. Similarly, the image or idea of the world is also dynamic while Marx accepted the use-value of the dialectical processes he wanted to apply it in the study of economics rather than to leave it as a concept applied to ideas alone. Further Hegel's "idealism" stressed the mind and ideas, and not the material world. That is the say it is the mind that is significant, and that the mind and psyche alone that exist. This is admittedly an extreme position and Feurbach tried to ameliorate

it by saying that Hegel had overemphasised “consciousness” and the spirit of a culture. In order to critique Hegel Feurbach pointed out that it was society that projected God and put him in a hallowed position above themselves, getting separated/distanced from God himself but nevertheless imbuing God with various uplifting attributes.

Marx though aware of Hegel’s and Feurbach’s positions was critical of these theories. For Marx everything could be reduced to a material base not to the mind and its processes. For Marx capitalism was the problem which led to alienation, polarisation and revolution. And for Marx revolution by the proletariat was the answer to this “evil”. Marx’s approach led him to the work of Ricardo and Smith who use political economists and it was these studies which finalised Marx’s approach which pointed out that the profit of the capitalist was at the expense or exploitation of the wage earners/labourers. Thus the ‘surplus value’ was the very basis of exploitation and the root of the capitalist system. In fact the fast growth rate of the capitalist systems siphoned off profits large enough to reinvest into the economic system (Marx, 1862).

#### Box 1.3: Marxian Ideology

There is a sociological theory within Marx’s economic works, but Marx’s radical ideas also fit into politics and it is perhaps this reason that his ideas were questioned even as he had questioned Hegel and Feurbach. That Marx’s work was ideological created much opposition to it especially by the scholars with conservative learning. It was Marx’s polemical style that created problems not simply the presence of ideology perse.

Marx’s sociology created many critics in its wake and many works focused on the type of activist orientation that was part of his approach. There were other reasons that led to an eclipse of Marx’s dialectical materialism but his ideological aspect was a major area of difficulty for other sociologists and thinkers. This radical approach was not appreciated by the conservative sociologists who had been bred to hate traces of anarchy in the social fabric – not just the disruptions of the Enlightenment or the industrial revolution. Instead Marx was fueling through his studies a mood of hostility and aggression which Marx felt would lead to a “polarisation” of classes and the poor exploited proletariat would violently dispossess the capitalist class of their factories, industries, banks and so on. Thereafter a period of social harmony would begin in which there was a societal/community ownership of the means of production. There would be an end to exploitation of the ‘have-nots’ by the ‘haves’.

This thumbnail sketch indicates the kind of radical approach that Marx had was basically oriented to a violent overthrow of the exploiting capitalists by the exploited proletariat. Marx’s emphasis therefore was on the exploitative/oppressive nature of capitalism. His theoretical analysis was aimed at removing this aspect of capitalism. This according to Marx meant a violent, bloody anarchic kind of overthrow of capitalism. Such a revolution would by itself remove the alienation and other negative aspects of the capitalist social formation.

## 1.7 Weberian Ideology

We can turn now to another major German sociologist that of Max Weber (1864-19 20). It has often been observed that Max Weber developed his ideas

and theories keeping Marxian thought as a counterpoint or point of reference/ departure to begin his theorising. According to Weber Marx had developed a uni-causal theory in which every social aspect was driven or propelled forward by the economy and the economic factors. This criticism can be expressed by pointing out that Marx's theory of "economic determinism" did not go down very well with Weber, who in contrast pointed out that were several factors or causes which are at work simultaneously in a society and make it operate. In short Weber's idea was that any aspect of social process had several causes that made it operate and no single complex of factors (e.g. the economy) could be given primacy so far as social processes are concerned.

For the materialists who believed in economic determinism it was the material factor that determined ideology. However, we find that in the case of Max Weber the sequence is held to be the other way round – that is it is the ideas that determine what is done with the economy. Weber was especially concerned with the effect of religions ideas on economic development. Thus in his study on Protestantism he showed how ideas themselves are capable of generating economic development. Weber also studied other religious than Protestantism, including Hinduism of which he felt that its lower rate of economic development was due to a constricting segmentation of society into a large number of castes or *jatis*. This meant that once again the landlord or person with land holdings began to exploit the lower castes with unfair sharing of the produce if it was sharecropping and many related demands if it was possible to exploit them further. This however does not bear great depth because sociologists in the fifties conducted studies and came to the conclusion that Hinduism does not create economic impediments and caste adapts to a new economic challenge, in a positive manner. Weber was interested in how the process of rationalisation led to economic development and to the creation and existence of large bureaucracies and other social institutions (Weber, 1904). Weber was concerned with how a social actor makes decisions regarding his goals. He pointed out however, that these decisions were themselves influenced by the rules and regulations that exist in the society.

#### Box 1.4: Formal Rationality

Weber was concerned with what is known as formal rationality, was thus enveloped by the development of bureaucratisation. Thus Weber pointed out there are three types of authority in political structures. These are the 1) traditional, 2) charismatic, and 3) rational legal systems of authority. While the traditional systems and charismatic authority have been witnessed historically it is the rational legal system which was involved with the development of bureaucracy in the modern sense. Traditional authority derives from a sanctity of belief patterns, like that in monarchy where succession is in a line of kings. Thus the prince who becomes king by succession is an example of traditional authority. On the other hand charismatic authority is based on something "extraordinary" which the incumbent has which creates leadership. The belief among the adherents of the Charismatic leaders powers is enough for the phenomenon to exist. Thus these two types of authority are historically embedded we find that rational-legal authority is the basic modern modality of leadership. Most political systems derive leaders from a rational legal procedure e.g. the President; Prime Minister etc. of modern states generally adopt a rational legal procedure.

Ultimately Weber's theories proved more acceptable than those of Marx, especially the political and economic applications. They were liberal in some ways and conservative in other ways and unlike Marx he did not espouse total radicalism and violent revolutions in order to find a solution to the "problems" of capitalism. Weber in fact was quite against such "solutions". Thus the western sociologist found Weber reassuring after the polemical writing of Marx. Weber's writing was formal and academic and this made it easier to understand and holistic in the outlook. It is little wonder that Weber was the most prominent German sociologist of his time. At the same time in Britain the Sociologists were also busy responding to their social context in which they were embedded. British sociologists tended to study the individual and his role in societal existence and development. Thus here sociology was built around the factors of political economy, social reform, and that of the social-evolution theory.

As regards political economy, it was a theory of capitalism which had been discussed by Adam Smith who spoke of an "invisible hand" that controlled the market forces. The market was over and above the individual and regulated his behavior. Thus the market forces were viewed as a source of social order and cohesion in society. Following this perspective the sociologist was not involved in criticizing market forces on society at large. Rather his job was to study societies, primitive and contemporary and draw out reports for use by the government to fulfill societal goals.

## 1.8 The British Sociologists

At this point of time British sociologists collected field based data and then combined these findings into a collective picture. The emphasis was on statistical presentation with little or no theorizing. However, the need for theorising was clearly felt by many sociologists. The statistically oriented sociologists were also extremely close to the government and therefore failed to see any flaw in the overall political and economic system.

### Reflection and Action 1.2

Which were the most important early British Sociologists. Give their theories in brief.

Now there was another basic characteristic in British sociology and this was the concern for reforming individuals and then keeping them to fulfill the larger goals of society. Although these sociologists saw the flaws in the social system of the time they were nevertheless still interested in solving problems by laying the blame on individual behavior and attitudes. In following this approach these sociologists showed a high degree of respect to the society in which they were members. This was clearly a conservative stand, yet it was felt to be necessary to ward off the ogre of Marxian Socialism.

There were some paradoxes in the situation that the British sociologists found themselves in. Thus even problems such as poverty were not held to have systematic basis. Instead it was the individuals themselves, alone or in groups who were blamed for their poverty. This is a somewhat circular argument and put the individual at the centre of any kind of social ills or problems. Individual problems of many types were analysed, including factors such as 'ignorance', 'crime' or 'alcoholism'. These were all aspects of the individual especially alcoholism which was regarded yet again as an individual condition or pathology and not in any way connected to the whole of



society. As can be seen here was once again an extreme position. However, it was a matter of time that social structure became more prominent especially in the theories of social evolution. This was forwarded by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Spencer was a relative liberal and believed that the state should not interfere with the market. That is Spencer believed in laissez faire. This indicated that he was not an advocate of social reform but wanted social dynamics to be without external interventions.

## 1.9 Spencer's Evolutionism

Spencer was a 'Social Darwinist' and was of the opinion that society would progress by itself and that this evolution should not be interfered with. Spencer went to the extent of comparing social institutions with plants and animals. Thus he felt that social institutions would progressively adapt to their environment by themselves without any definite impetus. Spencer took Darwin's premise of "survival of the fittest" where those people who could adapt to the social and natural environment would live while those who could not so adapt met with their end (Buttel, 1990).

Spencer also saw society as an organism, in which different parts or 'organs' were interconnected and each had a role or function to perform in the overall working of the organism. Thus unlike Comte whose evolutionism was in terms of ideas, Spencer had the real material world which he wanted to explain analyse and interpret.

The evolutionary focus of Spencer is at least twofold. In the first instance Spencer speaks of the "size" factor in social evolution. Thus as the size of the society increases so do the various infrastructural and institutional need and requirements. Differentiation and specialisation begin to manifest in every sphere and the fact is that both the size and complexity of a town is very different from a metropolitan. According to Spencer the size of a society increases by various groups amalgamating and bonding to form larger societies. Thus Spencer viewed increase in size from that of a simple community to that which is complex or "compound".

Another evolutionary schema that Spencer offered was that of militant to industrial societies. Militant societies are early forms of organisation meant mainly for defense of a society or aggression towards another society. Such violent attitudes were in themselves responsible for increase in the size of a society which was so important for social evolution. Yet when industrial societies are established and warfare becomes dysfunctional and obstructs evolution. Industrial societies are noteworthy for their human interaction and high specialisation. The state is simply a monitoring agency and its basic role is to keep law and order. This is because industrial society represents in Spencer a quantum leap from militant societies and such societies move towards their own perfection. Provided a society is strongly bonded and harmonious it will survive. But if there is weak bonding and internal social fissures it would, according to Spencer, die out.

## 1.10 Conclusion

The early ideas of sociologists were very important indications of how the context creates an impact of the mind of the sociologist. The sociologists we have discussed were all affected by their social and psychological environment. However, as we have seen that each one of them tended to

interpret the social world in their own individualistic ways. However it would be clear to you by now that the context of theory is essentially society and culture at a particular time and place. It can then be said that social theory is in itself a reflection of the social environment and the time in which it was developed also put its stamp on the theory. Therefore, each era, each 'Age' responds with newer and more different theoretical interpretations which are the most apt for that time. There is then an 'inner' and an 'outer' context from which social theory derives. As noted in our introduction to this unit the 'inner context has to do with the individual himself and his personal way of analysing developments in the 'outer' or encapsulating society. This is not to say that is any seriality from the 'outer' to the 'inner' context. Rather they exist in an interrelationship between the individual mind and the societal developments and societal consciousness. Only when this interrelationship is clearly explained and analyzed by a thinker does social process 'inner' and 'outer' create a theory of society as a whole. It might then be said that the early social theorists and theories which they developed was a clear headed response to the social upheavals and developments, e.g. the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution and so on. Finally there is a feed-forward and a feedback effect in each situation which can partly help explain the rising of early social analysis and their implications.

## 1.11 Further Reading

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