

## Methodology of Social Sciences: From Positivism to Humanism and the Emergence of Sociology

Manish Beniwal

Research Scholar Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Abstract:** Emile Durkheim is an eminent figure in the discipline of sociology. Out of his very many achievements, the most celebrated one, for which sociologists are indebted to him, is his struggle to institutionalise and claim the legitimacy for sociology as a distinct discipline, which he had succeeded in doing significantly. In his significant work "The Rules of Sociological Method", Durkheim laid out the foundation of the building blocks of sociology, i.e. Social Facts, and elaborated upon their treatment as observable, objective facts. Durkheim applied the natural sciences methodology, e.g. empirical observation, quantitative data like statistics, etc., to sociology. His contribution to Sociology has been widely acknowledged and appreciated, but his methodological position has been heavily criticised. There have been numerous critiques from various schools, but in this paper, I will be focusing on 4 main theories, i.e. German Historicist Doctrines (Wilhelm Dilthey), Max Weber's Interpretative Understanding (Verstehen), Alvin Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology and finally Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory.

**Keywords:** Positivism, social facts, objectivity, verstehen, reflexive sociology, methodological dualism, structure, agency.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Bierstadt argues that "sociology has a long past but only a short history." (Bierstadt, 2013, p. 14) Although it is Auguste Comte who coined the term Sociology and is considered the father of sociology, the ideas on this subject run long back in history. It can be traced in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Cicero, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and the list runs long. (Bierstadt, 2013, p. 10) "All intellectual fields of profoundly shaped by the social settings. This is particularly true for sociology, which not only is derived from the setting but takes the social setting as its basic subject matter." (Ritzer, 2010, p. 4). The paper emphasises the socio-economic circumstances of the 19th century that determine the direction for development and progress in the field of sociology.

Political and social upheavals that began with the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued till the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries played a vital role in the development of sociological theorising. The stimuli for these renewed impetus, on one hand, were the positive impact of unprecedented socio-economic disruption caused by these revolutions; however, the chaotic, unstable social conditions experienced by humankind during these times were the tipping point in favour of these developments. The early theorists brought upon themselves the task of restoring the social order that was lost in this transition. Equally important was the Industrial Revolution that happened in the Western world in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this period, the society had to experience and withstand the transformation from the small-scale agrarian economy to the one based on mass production unleashed by large-scale mechanisation. It was the time when people were leaving the countryside in search of a better livelihood in cities. This shift, slowly and surely, revealed its innate dysfunctional characteristics. The majority of the people were working very hard and for long hours in these factories. As all the resources were owned by a small minority of the population, over time, they became richer and gained control over the majority of the economic resources. These industrialists, in collusion with the politically powerful class, systematically

exploited a large section of society. This stark inequality created upheaval in Western Societies and shaped the thoughts of many early sociologists, including Max Weber, Karl Marx, George Simmel, etc. They brought upon themselves the task of understanding this chaotic situation that the society was experiencing and coming out with all possible solutions. (Coser, 2012, p. 35) The social as well as the intellectual factors played an important role in the emergence of sociology. The Renaissance, which was then followed by the Enlightenment, also had an impact on sociological theorising. Famous thinkers of this period, like Charles Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau, not only fuelled the French Revolution but also laid down the intellectual basis of the discipline of sociology. Though neither of these theorists ever used the word sociology, their works contributed immensely to the development of this discipline. Durkheim in 1960 acknowledged by describing the contributions of these scholars in his writings. In *Montesquieu and Rousseau: Forerunners of Sociology*, he claimed that the works of these two laid down the foundation for sociology as a scientific discipline. Thus, the social conditions created the need for the discipline of sociology, but it was the intellectual forces that ushered in the creation of building blocks for the same. (Durkheim, 1960, p. 13)

Further, this paper discusses the works of the theorists to substantiate the arguments and claims. The roots of Durkheimian sociology can be traced in the history and the intellectual period in France. He happened to live during the most turbulent time in French history, the chaotic war with Prussia and the unstable, conflicting political party – the Third Republic. All of these problems that clouded him, along with his conservative family background, led him towards finding a moral order in society. Therefore, in his work, he asserted the importance of the group over the individual and explored causes of social order and disorder in society.

## 2. Durkheim's social facts and methodology

Durkheim was a distinct French sociologist who was the first to be appointed a chair in Sociology. In his endeavours, Durkheim laid down the standards to study sociology. "In 1895 he published first methodological study of sociology in which he observed that his predecessors of the 19th century like Comte, Spencer hardly went beyond generalities concerning the nature of societies, the relationship between the social and the biological realm." (Durkheim, 1982, p. 48)

Durkheim (1982) carves out distinct subject matter for sociology, thereby making it distinct from philosophy (abstraction) and psychology (particularism). In order to do so, he strongly advocated the use of empirical research (natural science's methodology), which would make sociology scientific in nature. Durkheim aimed to develop a science which can carry out "the study of social institutions, investigating social interdependencies seeking causal laws and applying the comparative methods, while avoiding speculative abstractions and overspecialization" (Lukes, 1985, p. 56).

To establish sociology as a science, it is significant to distinguish it from the common sensical knowledge. Further, Durkheim argues that "if a science of societies exist, one must certainly not expect it to consist of a mere paraphrase of traditional prejudices. It should rather cause us to see things in a different way from the ordinary man, for the purpose of any science is to make discoveries, and all such discoveries more or less upset accepted opinion" (Durkheim, 1895, p. 3). Also, the scholar should not be influenced by the results of investigations. To substantiate the argument, according to Durkheim (1985), there exists a huge difference between the point of view of a layman (common-sensical knowledge) and that of a sociologist. Durkheim demonstrates it by discussing the example of crime.

The sociologist must adopt what Durkheim thought was "the state of mind of a physicists, chemists and physiologists when they venture into an as yet unexplored area of their scientific field" (Durkheim, 1895:37). This involved making the move that had led from alchemy to chemistry and astrology to astronomy, abandoning

our everyday prenotions. These, because they were developed unmethodical in order to satisfy needs that are of an exclusively practical nature, are devoid of any scientific value” (Lukes, 1985, p. 56).

The nature of sociology is specifically social. For Durkheim, if sociology is to be possible “it must above all have an object all of its own - a reality which is not in domain of the other sciences.” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 38) Traditional French Catholicism and social conservatism were both rejected by Durkheim in the making of new science. “In opposition to the eclectic, individualistic and often crudely journalistic approaches of other contemporary social scientists, Durkheim sought to distinguish sociology, as the science which studies the objective reality of ‘social fact’, from psychology which he defines as the study of the individual consciousness. Sociological explanation dealt with collective, not individual forces” (Swingewood, 1984, p. 99). According to Durkheim, “A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exercising over the individual and external constraints Or Which is general over the hole of a given society will state having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations. “(Durkheim, 1895, p. 27)

According to Durkheim, the central features of social facts are their externality, coerciveness, generality and independent existence. Social facts are external as they reside outside the individual consciousness and are independent of will. An individual experiences a social fact as a part of his/her objective environment, something which is already formed, therefore the individual is obliged to it. It even endures while the individuals die out. Social facts are not the creation of a single individual; rather, it is a synthesis of many individual consciousnesses. Out of their interaction, a new reality is created, which is a social fact. This synthesis is sui generis in nature, i.e. the summation is not equal to its parts. Further, Durkheim argues:

“Whenever elements of any kind combine, by virtue of this combination they give rise to a new phenomenon. One is therefore forced to conceive of these phenomena as residing, not in the elements, but in the entity formed by the union of these elements. The living cell contains nothing save chemical particles, just as society is made up of nothing except individuals. Yet it is very clearly impossible for the characteristic phenomena of life to reside in atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen” (Durkheim, 1982, p. 10)

Durkheim (1982) argues the interactions among individuals that collectively constitute any society give rise to phenomena distinct from those that occur within isolated consciousness. This compels the recognition that such social facts originate within society itself rather than within its individual members. In this sense, these phenomena exist external to individual consciousness—just as the defining characteristics of life exist beyond the mere chemical components that comprise living organisms.

Social facts (1982) are endowed with coercive powers that they impose upon individuals and are experienced in the form of legal and moral rules. This coercion is not felt if the individuals conform to the set patterns, but if they invalidate or deviate from it, they experience a reaction- social punishment. This may vary in degree according to the deviation. If the deviation is severe, the institution of a repressive system is there to take care of it, but if one does not follow the day-to-day norms, the coercion is felt in the form of social ridicule. For Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method is a manifesto for sociology to establish itself as objective, specific and methodical. “His explicit methodological intentions for sociology, then, concerned its objective, its specificity, its methods of explanation and its transformative relations to the other disciplines.” (Lukes, 1985, p. 56) For achieving objectivity in the discipline of sociology, ‘social facts as things’. That should be taken as realities by the sociologists, i.e. having features independent of its components which can be studied only by taking into account its external characters, which can be observed like legal codes, statistics, etc. A thing stands in opposition to an idea; it is an object of knowledge which one cannot “conceptualize adequately as an idea but the simple process of intellectual analysis”(Durkheim, 1982, p. 7). The above discussion indicates that Durkheim places sociology very near to the natural sciences, and he devises the same tools and methodology (use of quantitative data, empirical observation, etc) that were used by the natural sciences to understand its

subject matter, i.e. social facts. Also, the language that he has used while writing his works shows his inclination towards the natural sciences. The following are examples from his works to prove this point. His model of causation was heavily influenced by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century physics, chemistry, biology and medicine. Also, "his frequent use of the language of 'collective forces' and 'social currents', appealing to the analogy of thermodynamics and electricity. (Lukes, 1985, p. 96)

In work on suicide, Durkheim (1951) explains that within every person there is "a collective force for a determinate amount of energy, impelling men to self-destruction, such forces determine our behaviour from without, just like physico-chemical forces and their strength can be measured as one does the strengths of electric current." (Durkheim, 1951, pp. 299, 309-10). Also, he compares religious forces with those of heat and electricity, which the body receives from some external source. Durkheim's model of social causation was also influenced by chemical analogies. This is very clear when he tries to explain the social reality as a unique phenomenon independent of its individual components. He argues that "the hardness of bronze lies neither in the copper, nor in the tin, nor in the lead which has been used to form it, which are all soft or malleable bodies. The hardness arises from the mixing of them" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 10).

The biological influence on the writings of Durkheim can be seen in the revolutionary framework of his theories, the typology he made for social species and the distinction between physiological and anatomical facts. Also, his famous distinction between normal and pathological social facts is all borrowed from the medical framework.

### 3. Dilthey's historicism and the limits of positivism

There were disagreements with Durkheim's understanding of the social sciences. The critics argued that human society is a unique realm which does not follow recurrent laws like those of the natural world; rather, humans are autonomous and have the freedom to determine their actions. Therefore, they counter the natural sciences' methodology, considering it insufficient for the social sciences and question the thought of sociology as a science. The positivists only observed humans as objects; therefore, they failed to add the elements of understanding to their methodological framework. Dilthey argues that the "nature, the subject matter of the physical sciences, embraces the reality which has a rise independently of the activity of mind. Everything on which man has actively impressed his stamp forms the subject matter of the human studies" (Dilthey, 1976, p. 192).

#### 3.1 The emergence of sociology in the German intellectual environment

According to Swingewood, "in Germany, the emergence of sociology as a distinctive discipline owed much to positivist tradition, but in striving to define its own specific methodology and concept of society" (Swingewood, 1984, p.129). The major influencers on this development were Wilhelm Dilthey (1954), Heinrich Rickert (1896) and Wilhelm Windelband. (1899). Dilthey (1967) argued that there exists a fundamental difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences, while the former deals with the explanation of sensory experience, the latter, on the other hand, is concerned about the understanding of the inner experience.

Further, Swingewood argues that "Dilthey's separation of the natural from the cultural sciences was a distinction between what Windelband called the nomothetic sciences, concerned with establishing general laws, and general phenomena, and the idiographic sciences which were concerned with unique and repeatable events" (Swingewood, 1984, pp. 132-133). Explaining Dilthey's perspective, Swingewood argues:

"An important distinction between explanation and understanding: to explain an event, or an institution assumed and external, mechanical relation between the human subject and the world of reality: explanation was conceived in terms of mechanical causation which effectively eliminated the subjective aspect of human life from the analysis. But human culture consisted also of the category of understanding the interpretation of reality

by human subjects with saturates everyday life and without which society would be impossible.” (Swingewood, 1984:130)

Therefore, according to scholars such as Hodges (1952) and Swingewood (1984), Dilthey aimed that cultural sciences deal with is the systematising of this understanding that exists in day-to-day life and transforming it into a conceptual tool which helps to analyse the complex form of understanding. So, according to this school of thought, there lies a strict distinction between the natural sciences and the cultural sciences. Due to the unique subject matter that the latter studies, it is impossible for it to follow the footsteps of the natural scientists, as Durkheim argued in his wide writings.

#### 4. Humanism and Weber’s critique of positivism

Max Weber (1947), whose theory is often considered a watershed in Sociology, was a German sociologist and political economist who was born in Prussia. In his works, he demanded objectivity as well as analysis of motivations behind human actions in the social sciences. Therefore, Weber (1947) believed that the subject matter of sociology is social action, which is both subjective and objective in nature and “a social action is that action of an individual which is influenced by the actions and behaviour of the other persons and by which its direction determined” (Weber, 1947, p. 88). An action may be as a kind of positive intervention in a situation or deliberate refrainment from such intervention.

Weber attempts to bring together the opposite camps of positivists and German historicists. He partially accepts as well as rejects both of their understanding of social sciences. According to Weber (1947), for any discipline to develop, there is a need for generalisation and abstraction, but at the same time, there also exists a fundamental difference between the subject matter of Sociology and natural sciences, i.e. the subject matter of the former exhibits consciousness, while the latter lacks it. Man is an active, creative agent who cannot be understood only by his external manifestations (behaviour), but one has to take into consideration the underlying motivations behind his social action. Weber believed that motive “is a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer and adequate ground for the conduct of action” (Weber, 1947, p. 98). Therefore, the existence of general laws like those in natural sciences is not possible in social sciences due to the aspect of unpredictability and irrationality built into human action.

Thus, Weber focuses on verstehen or interpretative understanding. For Weber, sociology is a “science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (Weber, 1947, p. 88). According to Weber (1947), the Verstehen method involves two significant steps. First, there is the direct observational understanding of the subjective meanings of a given act, such as verbal utterance, irrational movements. “It is a rational observational understanding of actions” (Weber, 1947, p. 95), and the second is the explanatory understanding, which is important for understanding the various underlying motives and meanings that the actor attaches to his or her actions. “It is a rational understanding of motivation” (Weber, 1947, p. 96). By applying the Verstehen approach, one can build a sequence of motivations which underlie the social actions and therefore can be explained at the level of causality. “A correct causal explanation of a concrete source of action is arrived at the action and motives has been both correctly understood and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible” (Weber, 1947, p. 99). But the challenge faced by the social scientist is that of value, as while conducting the research, if the necessary precautions are not taken, then the result of his analysis can be a subjective monologue. Although Weber knew that sociology is a value-relevant science, and this is very clear in the choice of the problem that the investigator takes up while doing his research, he decides on them on the basis of his values and interests. It depends on the perspective of the investigating scholar, what he considers is ‘worthy to be known’. Further, Shils and Finch (1949) argue that “there is no absolutely objective scientific analysis of culture or of social phenomena independent of special and one-sided viewpoints according to which -expressly

or tactically, consciously or unconsciously -they are selected, analysed and organised for expository purposes” (Shils and Finch, 1949, p. 72). Thus, it becomes very clear that sociology has an inherent element of value which becomes inevitable in its course and can open the door for various value judgements; this can also be problematic while establishing sociology as a science, which demands objectivity for establishing certain limited generalisations. Therefore, Weber (1947) advocates that although the elements of value come with the selection of the problem, it should not contaminate the interpretation of the phenomena that the researcher is working on. He emphasised the significance of value neutrality in sociology. Another methodological tool that Weber uses to bridge the gap between the two opposite schools of thought of Positivists and German Historicists is the ‘ideal type’. According to Weber, ideal type “is the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena which are arranged according to those one sided emphasize viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.” (Weber, 1949, p. 90)

To distance himself from the individualising approach, Weber argued that “no scientific system is ever capable of reproducing all concrete reality, nor can any conceptual apparatus ever do the full justice to the infinite diversity of particular phenomena. All science involves selection as well as abstraction” (Coser, 2012, p. 223). Then, against the Positivists, he follows that “Social action is always probable rather than certain because the unique nature of social relationships generates the possibility of deviation from the expected course of action. The ideal type is the means of analysing the probability that the actor will follow one cause of action rather than another. Ideal types are concerned with the subjective elements in social life, those unique and unrepeatable elements of culture disregarded by positivist social theory” (Swingewood, 1984, p. 147).

Therefore, Weber’s notion of ideal type does not mirror or describe reality; it includes the essential and not average characteristics of the phenomena. It is a construct that facilitates the investigator to check on the similarities as well as the deviations of the case that he intends to study.

### **5. Gouldner’s reflexivity and critique of methodological dualism**

American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner, in his work ‘The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology’, offers a substantial argument against the positivist tradition that places sociology near natural sciences and adopts the same methodology for it. Against this strict scientific stand, Gouldner (1972) propounded ‘reflexive sociology’. He argued that knowledge is never independent of the knower and that sociology is intrinsically linked with its socio-economic and political context where it exists. Against the Methodological Dualism on which the natural sciences were premised was based on the elementary distinction between subject and object. This was also adopted by some of the sociologists belonging to the American and French school, they argued that just like in natural sciences, sociology's major concern should be discovering the general laws underlying a man's social behaviour, and for this, social scientists need to study social reality in an objective manner. This implies a distinction between the inquiring subject or the social scientist and the studied object. Gouldner (1972) rejects this assumption and argues that duality exists primarily because some people conceive knowledge as a piece of information, but the aim of sociology is to gather knowledge that facilitates a better understanding of man's varied interests, values and expectations.

Gouldner (1972) further argues that there should not be a differentiation between the knowledge of the world and the sociologist's knowledge of himself in the social world, by this, he becomes aware of his role as a knower and the agent of change, and this acts as an indispensable revenue for the awareness of the social world which he is a part of. A sociologist is incapable of knowing and understanding others without having in complete knowledge of himself and his social position in the social world. Further, Gouldner argues:



“What sociologists now most require from a Reflexive Sociology, however, is not just one more specialization, not just another topic for panel meetings at professional conventions, and not just another burbling little stream of technical reports .... The historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology as I conceive it, however, would be to transform the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level.... In deepening our understanding of our own sociological selves and of our position in the world, we can, I believe, simultaneously help to produce a new breed of sociologists who can also better understand other men and their social worlds. A Reflexive Sociology means that we sociologists must-at the very least-acquire the ingrained habit of viewing our own beliefs as we now view those held by others” (Gouldner, 1970, pp. 489-90).

## 6. Giddens theory of structuration: A new dimension to sociological analysis

Apart from the discussion above, an important critique of the Durkheimian understanding of social sciences comes from Anthony Giddens' structuration theory in his work “The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration”. In this theory, Giddens' (1984) main concern is the nature of the relationship shared between individuals and society. He tries to overcome the long-standing debate between structural over determinism and individualistic voluntarism. Giddens (1984) considers both the interpretative and the positivist schools as inadequate for the complete understanding of social reality. The former gives all importance to the meanings that an actor attaches to his social action but they tend to forget that the actor's agency or freedom is not unlimited rather these actions are placed in certain social context which is characterized by the asymmetrical distribution of resources and capabilities. Giddens calls them “strong on action, but we weak on structure and having little to say about the issues of constraint, power and large-scale social organisations” (Giddens, 1984, p. 4

He also rejects the view that structure has an overwhelming control over the behaviour of individuals and that social phenomena are the products of objective social structures as propounded by Functionalist and Structural theories. They emphasised “the pre-eminence of the social whole over its individual parts” (Giddens, 1984, p. 1). He further argues that structures are not always coercive on human agency but “operate by placing limits upon the range of options open to an individual” and at times can be enabling too. To explain this, he gives the example of Language. One cannot speak a language according to one's whims and fancies; one ought to follow various grammatical and vocabulary rules. In this sense, language places constraints upon individuals, but it is the individual's usage in daily life that saves the language from dying out. It also enables one to speak. Therefore, Giddens calls them “strong and structure, but weak on action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 4). Further, Giddens defines Structures as “rules and resources, organized as properties of social systems” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). In the theory of structuration, he therefore tries to do away with this clear demarcation between agency and structure by considering both as a mutually constitutive duality. Further elaborating it Giddens argues:

“We should see social life, not just as society out there or just the product of the individual here, but as a series of ongoing activities and practices that people carry on, which at the same time reproduce large institutions”(Giddens and Pierson, 1998, p. 76).

For Giddens, social sciences are “irretrievably hermeneutic”(Giddens, 1984, p.13); it depends on interpretation, but this does not mean that it does not include “technically-sophisticated, hard-edged research procedure” (Giddens, 1984, p. 219). Only with the proper understanding of both of them together can one achieve a holistic understanding of the social reality.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper begins by discussing the methodology that was adopted by Durkheim to understand the subject matter of sociology. He mainly focused on making sociology an objective science; therefore, his every step was laid in

that direction (Emphasising the use of quantitative methods like data collection through statistics, etc). He treated social facts as the subject matter of sociology as observable things that can be studied objectively. Durkheim's position has been severely criticised and the most fierce critique of his work came from the German historicist doctrines and specially Wilhelm Dilthey (Swingewood, 1984), who argued that there exists a fundamental difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences, while the former deals with explanation of sensory experiences, the latter is concerned about the understanding of the inner experiences therefore, these exist in opposition, one is explanation and the other is understanding. Hence, the generalisations that are possible in natural sciences cease to apply to human action as they are not subject to regularities like objects in the natural world.

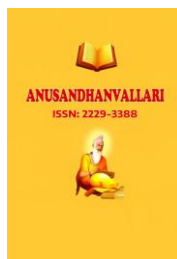
Further, in the paper, Max Weber (1947) tries to counter the opposing position of positivists and German historicists and partly accepts and rejects both of their understandings of social sciences. According to him, a certain amount of generalisations are important for the development of a discipline, but human beings cannot be studied like objects in the natural world, as they possess consciousness, and behind every action, there is an underlying motivation attached; therefore, it becomes a pivotal aspect and cannot be ignored. Therefore, he comes up with interpretative understanding or *Verstehen*.

Additionally, the paper emphasises the critique given by Alwin Gouldner (1972), who advocated reflexive sociology against the methodological dualism, which was a dominant conception of positivistic sociology. He argued that the sociologist must be aware of his position or his cultural location in society for a better understanding of his subjects. The final is the critique by Anthony Giddens (1984), who propounded the theory of structuration and rejected positivism on the grounds of its overwhelming preoccupation with the notion of structure while completely ignoring the factor of individual agency in understanding social reality. His theory explains the duality of structure, i.e. how both agency and structures work together to form the social reality. Therefore, Durkheim's (1982) approach was insufficient to completely understand the subject matter of sociology, which was very different from that of natural sciences. In that light, the paper attempts to discuss various other schools of thought in Sociology grappling with the holistic understanding of social reality, and this appears to be more realistic and just to the great discipline of sociology.

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