

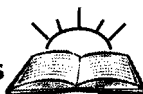
Unit 7

Positivism and its Critique

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 7 you will be able to learn and discuss the following themes.

- ❖ Positivism and its influence on sociology
- ❖ The contributions of Comte and Emile Durkhiem
- ❖ A critique of positivism
- ❖ Emergence of 'reflexive sociology'

7.1 Introduction

You have already become familiar in Unit 6 with an overview of the philosophy of social science. At this juncture, it would be a good idea for you to focus and concentrate on specific issues and modes of enquiry. In Unit 7 we are going to discuss positivism, a method of enquiry that sought to give immense cognitive prestige to the discipline, and wanted to convince its adherents that sociology too could be a science and follow the scientific methodological principles of empirical observation, deductive reasoning, and formulation of laws or universal generalisations (see Box 7.1 for salient features of positivism). As a matter of fact, this self-perception of sociology as a science sought to serve the following three purposes—:

- ❖ It separated sociology as an empirical science from humanities and philosophy.
- ❖ It gave a professional identity to the sociologist who ought to overcome the limiting identities emanating from caste, class and gender, and think in a more objective/rational/ universal fashion.
- ❖ The knowledge it would acquire would help us to reconstruct our society, and create a better world.

Section 7.2 traces the origin of positivism and Sections 7.3 and 7.4 discuss the early developments in positivism and its consolidation. Though positivism became a powerful sociological method, it had its critics. In Section 7.5 we show that positivism has now lost much of its appeal.

Box 7.1 Salient Features of Positivism

The salient features of positivism can be characterised as follows.

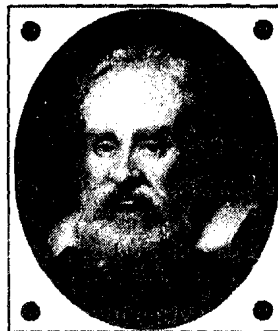
- ❖ It believes in the *unity of method*. Sociology is not different from the natural sciences as far as the method of enquiry is concerned.
- ❖ It celebrates objectivity and value neutrality. It, therefore, separates the knower from the known, subjectivity from objectivity, and fact from value.
- ❖ Sociology is not commonsense. It rests on explanatory principles, which give a universal character to the discipline.
- ❖ Sociology is a formal and organised body of knowledge, characterised by specialised skills and techno-scientific vocabulary.
- ❖ Sociology can strive for abstraction and generalisation. Human experiences can be explained through law-like generalisations.
- ❖ The scientific knowledge of society can be used for social engineering.

7.2 Heroic Science and Origin of Positivism

Herein lies an important question. Why did positivism grow at a certain juncture of history, and establish itself as the leading voice in the discipline? You already know how modern science was evolving, arousing immense optimism, and becoming hegemonic. The scientific thinking emanating from Bacon, Descartes and Newton, and scientific inventions and discoveries were altering the cultural/intellectual landscape of Europe. And eventually, the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century (see Box 7.2), as you have already learnt, was a turning point. It meant celebrating a new age of reason, objectivity and criticality. It was like coming out of the medieval order, religious influences, and asserting that scientific thinking would enable us to create a better world. It was difficult to escape the influence of the age. It was difficult not to be influenced by the spectacular success story of science. Science became knowledge itself: real, objective and foundational! And to survive in such a milieu was to accept science and its ascending power.

Box 7.2 Triumphs of Natural Sciences in the Eighteenth Century

The Enlightenment witnessed a period of spectacular triumphs in the natural sciences. Beginning with Issac Newton (1642-1727) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), natural science began a conquest of the natural world, which was a staggering success. This success did not go unnoticed in the social sciences. Rather, as many commentators have noted, the social sciences were born in the shadow of these triumphs. Furthermore, the methodological lessons that the natural sciences were teaching seemed to be very clear: if the methods of the natural science are strictly adhered to then the spectacular success of these sciences could be matched in the social sciences. The social sciences had only to await the arrival of their Newton (Hekman 1986: 5).



Galileo Galilei
(1564-1642)

Details in Box 7.2 possibly explain the origin of positivism. The assumption was that the identity of sociology as "true knowledge" could not be established without adopting the method of the natural sciences. There was yet another important factor. The new age characterised by the Industrial Revolution, expanding trade and commerce, and emergent bourgeoisie altered power relations in the West. It was the time that witnessed the assertion of the new elite: technologists, scientists and capitalists. They saw immense possibilities in science, and were strong



Issac Newton
(1642-1727)

adherents of a positivistic/ scientific culture and mode of enquiry. Yes, there were dissenting voices, say, the voices emanating from romanticism[®] that critiqued the worship of science and reason, and pleaded for imagination, subjectivity and creativity (as pointed out by Gouldner 1970). But then, the language of science was irresistible. The politico-economic establishment was sustaining it. Science was going to stay, and positivism was its inevitable consequence.

The entire phenomenon can be understood better if you reflect on the self-perception of science. For instance, it is argued that science is a radical departure from common sense (Nagel 1961: 1-14). Well, common sense may not necessarily be false. But common sense, unlike science, is seldom accompanied by a search for systematic explanations – the explanations derived from solid factual evidence. For instance, before the advent of modern science people knew the function of the wheel. But it was only modern science that provided us with an explanatory principle like the frictional force to make sense of the operation of wheels. Likewise, the principles formulated by Newton could explain innumerable facts: the behavior of the tides, the paths of projectiles, and the moon's motion. It is also argued that, unlike the indeterminacy of common sense, the language of science is more specific, focused and pointed. It abhors all sorts of vagueness. Even though the poets may speak of infinite stars, it would be argued, astronomers are interested in calculating and measuring their exact number. Furthermore, science, unlike common sense, is a distant, detached and abstract exercise. Whereas common sense has an intimate relationship with our everyday world, science is essentially neutral. You may enjoy the color of the sunset: but then, the electromagnetic theory, which provides a systematic account of optical phenomena, retains its remoteness and abstraction. In fact, science deliberately neglects the immediate values of things. That is why; it is argued that science is primarily critical in spirit. Whereas common sense tends to take things for granted, science problematises even our most cherished beliefs. This does not mean that common sense is necessarily false and science is true. What distinguishes science is its

critical spirit, its insistence on empirical evidence. Here we quote the words of Nagel (1971: 13).

The difference between the cognitive claims of science and common sense, which stems from the fact that the former are the products of the scientific method, does not connote that the former are invariably true. It does follow that while common sense beliefs are usually accepted without a critical evaluation of the evidence available, the evidence for the conclusions of science conforms to standards such that a significant proportion of conclusions supported by similar structured evidence remains in good agreement with additional factual data when fresh data are obtained.

Many were articulating this supremacy of science as a more reliable, objective and critical knowledge. For instance in Box 7.3 we bring to you Merton's (1972) four institutional imperatives of science.

Box 7.3 Merton's Four Institutional Imperatives of Science

- ❖ Science is *universal*. The validity of a scientific statement does not depend on any particularistic criterion. It is against all sorts of ethnocentrism. It is valid for all.
- ❖ Science implies the *communism of knowledge*: Scientist, it is argued, want nothing more than esteem and recognition. Scientist's findings and discoveries, far from remaining a private property, become a collective heritage. It is this shared culture that enables science to evolve, grow and progress dramatically.
- ❖ Science demands *disinterestedness*: a process of rigorous scrutinisation and examination of one's findings without any bias.
- ❖ Science is *organised skepticism* that distinguishes it. Everything for science is an object of critical enquiry. There is nothing sacred or profane. Science investigates, examines and problematises everything. That is the success story of science.

In the self-perception of science as given in Box 7.3, you see a *positive* story: a positive affirmation of the virtues of science, its ability to construct objective, empirical, critical and universal knowledge, which is free from personal/ political bias and prejudice. In a way, it is a *heroic* notion of science. Positivism was also an affirmation of this positive/ heroic science. It was positive because it meant certainties of science. And it also meant a positive attitude towards life: using science for improving our lot.

7.3 Early Positivism

Positivism, as you can gather, emerged out of a situation in which there was tremendous optimism centered on the cognitive power of science. As mentioned in Unit 6, you also know that modern sociology evolved at a specific juncture of European history when the entire social landscape altered because of the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It was indeed a new age, and sociology as a formal/

academic discipline was trying to make sense of it. In fact, the roots of early positivism could be found in the first half of the nineteenth century in France. Imagine the state of post-revolutionary France. There was a significant change in the domain of knowledge. The separation of science and philosophy became inevitable; new scientific journals started appearing, and a close link between science and industry was established. It was felt that there was a single scientific method applicable to all fields of study. Possibly Saint Simon (1760-1825), one of the early sociologists, articulated this aspiration rather sharply. A scientist, he felt, is one who predicts, and it is this power of prediction that gives him the power. He, therefore, pleaded strongly for extending the scientific outlook from the physical sciences to the study of human beings. It was an urge to create some kind of a *social physics* so that sociology could accomplish its historical mission: completing the unfinished agenda of the Industrial Revolution.

Indeed, this close affinity with science gave birth to positivism. Auguste



Saint Simon
(1760-1825)

Comte (1798-1857), the founder of modern sociology, established positivism as the most cherished doctrine of sociology (see also Unit 1). Yet, like Saint Simon, Comte too was witnessing the revolutionary transformation. In a way, he saw the contradiction between the two social forces: theological/ military and scientific/ industrial. Like a visionary, he felt that this contradiction could be resolved only by the triumph of the scientific/ industrial society. Scientists, as he saw all around, were replacing theologians as

the moral guardians of the new social order, and industrialists were replacing the warriors. Not solely that. Comte too shared the Enlightenment assertion that it was possible for science to grasp the workings of the world. He believed that positivist or scientific knowledge was the inevitable outcome of the progressive growth of the individual mind as well as the historical development of human knowledge.

From 1871 to 1823 Comte and Saint Simon collaborated so closely that it was almost impossible to distinguish the contributions of the two. It was at this juncture that they spoke of social physics, and the need to discover natural and immutable laws of progress which are as necessary as the law of gravity. But then they separated, and eventually Comte emerged as an independent scholar. It was during 1830-1892 that he published six volumes of *Course of Positive Philosophy*. And finally, during 1851-1854, he published four volumes of *System of Positive Politics*.

What made Comte immortal in the discipline was his celebrated 'law of three stages' (see also Unit 1). First, he spoke of the *theological stage*: a stage in which the mind explains phenomena or mundane occurrences by ascribing them to the unfathomable gods. The fact is that without

some guide one cannot begin to make systematic observations. And sciences in their infancy could not escape the questions relating to the essences of phenomena and their ultimate origins to which theological answers are most appropriate. Second, he spoke of the *metaphysical stage* in which abstract forces, powers and essences, rather than spiritual forces, are considered responsible for worldly affairs. And finally, as Comte argued, there was a *positive* or scientific stage in which we abandon the search for ultimate origins, purposes, or abstract forces, and become more concrete and focused: we observe the relations between phenomena, and arrive at laws because *the aim of positive philosophy is to consider all phenomena as subject to invariable natural laws* (see the example in Box 7.4).

Box 7.4 An Example to Understand the Deeper Meaning of Comte's Law of Three Stages

Let us take a simple illustration to comprehend the deeper meaning of these three stages of knowledge. Imagine fire as a phenomenon. It is possible to explain it, as the Vedic hymns suggest, as a manifestation of a powerful deity called *Agni*. Now Comte would have argued that explaining fire as a manifestation of *Agni* is a theological explanation. But suppose one goes beyond these Vedic rituals, and enters a higher stage of contemplative/abstract thought, and sees fire as something symbolising human beings' quest for truth and purity: burning all egotistic passions and impulses. Yes, Comte would have argued that it is a metaphysical explanation. But then, if you argue that fire is just a physico-chemical phenomenon that can be explained in the form of a natural law, Comte would have argued that you have finally arrived the positive stage. In other words, positivist knowledge is empirical and universal; something that is concrete and demonstrable. Here is a piece of knowledge without a metaphysical/ theological significance. It demystifies the world. So when you see the rains, you need not explain it as *Indra's blessing*; nor do you see it as a manifestation of man's poetry to overcome the dryness of his being. Instead, the rains you see, in this positivist stage, can be explained in terms of the scientific principles of heat, cloud formation and water cycle!

Not all branches of knowledge, argued Comte, reach the positive stage simultaneously. The 'lower' sciences, like astronomy, mechanics, chemistry and biology, develop fast. These are lower sciences because these are less complex, less dependent on the other sciences, and their distance from human affairs is far greater. But sociology, being more complex, and more near to everyday life, reaches the positive stage quite late. Comte was, however, hopeful that even for sociology the time had finally arrived. It could now project itself as a positive science, analyse social phenomena, and discover the laws governing the relations among them. Sociology, for him, is the *queen of the sciences* because without the guidance of its laws, the discoveries of the lower sciences could not be utilised to their maximum advantage for humanity.

There are two kinds of sciences, namely, *analytic* and *synthetic*. Physics and chemistry can be said to be analytic because they establish laws among isolated phenomena. Biology is synthetic because it is impossible

to explain an organ apart from the living creature as a whole. Likewise, according to Comte, sociology is synthetic because everything, be it religion or state, has to be studied in the context of the entire society.

It is not difficult to draw the implications of positivism. There is no free will in mathematics and physics. Likewise, as Comte thought, there is no free will in sociology. Sociology, Comte believed, could determine what is, what will be, and what should be. In other words, social phenomena are subject to strict determinism.

Let us understand what it means. Even a child learning elementary mathematics would tell you that $2+2=4$. If you and I want it to be different, it cannot be altered. In other words, $2+2=4$ is an iron law, say, like the law of gravitation. It prevails irrespective of our subjective states of mind.

That is precisely the kind of knowledge positivism is striving for. Suppose as a Marxist you put forward a sociological law that socialism is inevitable because that is the way history progresses. You are arguing like a positivist, and equating Marxism with an invariable natural law like the law of gravitation that exists, no matter what kind of life projects you and I have, and what kind of thoughts we cherish.

Yes, Comte was a great proponent of science. He believed in the essential Enlightenment notion of progress and in the arrival of the new age of scientific objectivity. Yet, let us not forget that Comte was also a great moralist. He was deeply concerned about social order and its moral foundation. In fact, he sought to use positivist sociology to reconstruct his society. No wonder, positivist sociology, for him, would act like a religion, of course a secular religion for humankind. This led Nisbet (1967:58) to comment that 'positive sociology for Comte is simply medievalism minus Christianity'. Look at the state of the French society Comte was confronting. True, the revolution was a turning point. But then, it also led to new problems, which, as he felt, were quite disturbing. For instance, he could not give his consent to the prevalent 'anarchy' leading to exaggerated individualism. It was, for him, a disease of modern civilisation. Nor did he give his consent to those who pleaded for divorce rights. His anxiety was that it would lead to the breakdown of the centrality of the family; it would also weaken the community. This moral crisis, or the crisis of order, was something that must be resolved. And it was his conviction that the new positivist sociological knowledge could fulfill the void, and serve the therapeutic function of religion. No wonder, he was equally concerned about social static or restoration of order. In fact, if you think deeply, you would realise that Comte's positivism conveyed the interesting message that science, despite the progressive role it played, was also an integral component of the Establishment, 'an ideology of order'!

7.4 Consolidation of Positivism

Auguste Comte provided the intellectual foundation of positivist sociology. And possibly it was this French tradition that gave birth to one of the most distinguished classical sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim consolidated and elaborated positivist sociology. In a way, the *Rules of Sociological Method* that he published in 1895 gave a new momentum to the discipline. The subject matter of sociology, he repeatedly emphasised, is the domain of *social facts* that cannot be comprehended by any other discipline. It is, therefore, important to know how he defined social facts.

You can understand it better through an example from your everyday life. Imagine one fine morning you choose to walk barefoot. Nobody has compelled you to do so; it is your free choice, your own decision. But then, imagine one evening you decide to visit a temple, and offer your prayers. Before entering the temple you remove your shoes, wash your hands, and walk barefoot.

Do you see a qualitative difference in these two experiences? Yes, there is a significant difference. In the second case you are not really free. Well, you may argue that it is you who have chosen to walk barefoot inside the temple complex. But that is because you have internalised the prevalent practice so well that it looks almost natural and spontaneous. Imagine what would have happened had you tried to enter the temple without removing your shoes. You would have experienced severe constraint and resistance. From the temple authorities to the other devotee: all would object to your act and regard it as an insult to the sacred space. In other words, walking barefoot inside the temple is a fact that exists out there as a thing. It has an independent force that transcends your own will. If you disobey the practice, you would be forced, coerced, isolated or ridiculed. Such facts, according to Durkheim, are called social facts.

Everybody eats, drinks and sleeps. But not all such facts can be called social. Then, there would be no difference between biological/ physiological facts and social facts. In fact, there are some distinctive features of social facts. First, social facts exist outside you. Imagine a tree that you are seeing from your window. It has a reality of its own. Even if you close your eyes and refuse to see it, the tree exists as it is. Likewise, Durkheim (1964: 1) explained that

When I fulfill my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself, and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited through my education.

These facts are indeed different. The currency you use in your economic exchange, the language you speak in the process of communication, the

rituals you celebrate as a member of a religious community, all these are social facts. Their existence does not depend on your or my will. As Durkheim (1964: 2) put it, 'here are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness'.

Second, social facts are endowed with *coercive power*. True, in our everyday life we do not experience this constraint. The reason is that, because of habit, socialisation and internalisation, we tend to experience social facts as natural and spontaneous. But then, as Durkheim (1964: 2-3) reminded, 'if I do not submit to the conventions of my society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word'.

Third, social facts as things need to be distinguished from their individual manifestations. In fact, Durkheim held that social facts 'acquire a body, a tangible form, and constitute a reality in their own right, quite distinct from the individual facts which produce it'. For example, codified legal and moral rules, or articles of faith wherein religious groups condense their beliefs; none of these can be found entirely reproduced in the applications made of them by individuals. Yet, sociologically it is important to categorise their tangible, crystallised aspects as social facts, not their individual manifestations.

The meaning of 'social' in social facts is, therefore, clear. As Durkheim (1964: 3) stated, 'their source is not in the individual, their substratum can be no other than society, either the political society as a whole or someone of the partial groups it includes, such as religious denominations, political, literary, and occupational associations'.

To sum up, you can borrow Durkheim's (1964: 13) own words, and conclude:

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.

You can understand Durkheim's scientific sociology better if you look at the 'rules' he prescribed for studying social facts. One such rule which has often been talked about is that it is absolutely necessary to *observe social facts as things*. What does it mean? A thing is a thing because its facticity cannot be altered even if you and I want it. It is in this sense that external objects like a tree, a table and a chair exist as things. If you wish to observe a thing as it is, you should not confuse it with your own ideas and sentiments. A tree needs to be seen as a tree, even if you hate trees. In other words, almost like Francis Bacon, Durkheim would argue that our ideas and sentiments or 'idols' should not prevent us

from seeing a thing as it is (see Unit 6 for the discussion of Bacon's ideas). A sociologist must follow this fundamental lesson of scientific objectivity. Take, for instance, marriage as a social fact. As an individual, you may not like the institution of marriage. But when as a sociologist you plan to study marriage as a social fact, retain your objectivity, separate your own likes and dislikes from facts, and see it as a thing codified in marriage laws, religious traditions and social customs. In other words, it is like separating the knower from the known facts from values. It is similar to the way a physicist studies the behavior of atoms, or a geologist studies the formation of mountains. Durkheim (1964: 30) elaborated further.

Social facts...qualify as things. Law is embodied in codes; the currents of daily life are recorded in statistical figures and historical monuments; fashions are preserved in costumes; and taste in works of art. By their very nature they tend towards an independent existence outside the individual consciousness, which they dominate. In order to disclose their character as things, it is unnecessary to manipulate them ingeniously.

Likewise, Durkheim recalled Rene Descartes, and reminded us of the need for overcoming all presuppositions. For Durkheim (1964: 32) it is like overcoming 'inferior' faculties like emotions, sentiments and feelings. Only then is it possible for the sociologist 'to emancipate himself from the fallacious ideas that dominate the mind of the layman'. No wonder, Durkheim (1964: 35) pleaded strongly for a scientific vocabulary in the discipline. Sociologists must avoid the indeterminacy of common sense language, and be clear about the specificity of the concept they use.

The subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena so defined should be included within this group.

It is equally important to avoid all sorts of vagueness while studying/observing an object. The physicist substitutes for the vague impressions of temperature and electricity by the visual representations of the thermometer and the electrometer. Likewise, when a sociologist studies social facts, s/he should not be carried away by their individual manifestations. Instead, it is important to find their expression in tangible and crystallised forms; for example, in legal codes, moral regulations, popular proverbs, statistical figures and religious conventions. Take an example. Suppose you are studying caste as a social phenomenon. It is possible that Ambedkar and Gandhi might have experienced and responded to caste hierarchy in different ways. But if you are practicing Durkheimian positivist sociology, you need not to be carried away by these individual manifestations. Instead, your task is to see caste as a thing, a structure rooted in codified laws, religious sanctions and social customs.

An important characteristic of science is its explanatory power. As sociology is scientific, it must explain social facts. For Durkheim, sociological explanations are objective and independent and cannot be reduced into psychological terms. It was in this sense that Durkheim (1964: 102)

made an interesting point that 'a whole is not identical with the sum of its parts'. It acquires an independent character that is qualitatively different from those of its component parts. Society is, therefore, not identical with the sum of individuals. It is, of course, true that without individuals there is no society. But society transcends the individual. While explaining social facts, it is important to understand the supremacy of the collective over the individual. Durkheim (1964: 104) clarified that

The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated. If, then, we begin with the individual, we shall be able to understand nothing of what takes place in the group. In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as between biology and the physiochemical sciences. Consequently every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we could be sure that the explanation is false.

It was in this sense that Durkheim, as his other substantial works suggest, provided sociological explanations for social facts like suicide, division of labor and moral education. In fact, as Durkheim (1964: 110) categorically stated, 'the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness'. Likewise, the function of a social fact needs to be seen in its relation to some social end. Take, for instance, punishment as a social fact. For Durkheim, its cause is the intensity of the collective sentiments that the crime offends. Likewise, its function is to maintain these very sentiments at the same degree of intensity. No wonder, for him, when the teacher punishes the child its function is not to cause physical suffering to the concerned child but to restore the sanctity of moral order in the classroom. To explain a social phenomenon, as Durkheim argued, is to find its cause as well as its function. And both cause and function are essentially social, not to be reduced to the individual psyche.

The craft of scientific sociology that Durkheim constructed gave a new momentum to the discipline. Sociology, he asserted, must come out of the influence of philosophy, and establish itself as a science. The principle of causality, he believed, can be applied to social phenomena. And sociology, as a result, would be free from ideological analysis; it would be neither individualistic, nor socialistic. Instead, sociology would be an objective study of social facts. This objectivity might reduce the 'popularity' of the discipline. But then, as if speaking like a prophet, Durkheim (1964: 146) said,

We believe, on the contrary, that the time has come for sociology to spurn popular success, so to speak, and to assume the exacting character befitting every science. It will then gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity...Assuredly, the time when it will be able to play this role successfully is still far off. However, we must begin to work now, in order to put it in condition to fill this role some day.

Let us not forget that Durkheim, despite his strong plea for scientific sociology, was deeply concerned about the moral foundation of society,

its stability and order. Possibly modern/ industrial societies, and their implicit differentiation, specialisation and division of labor made him confront a new problem. Gone are the days of simple societies characterised by 'mechanical solidarity'. But then, can modern societies survive merely through egotistic individualism and selfish interests? No wonder, he evolved a strong critique of utilitarianism and its celebration of the atomised individual trying to maximise one's pleasure. Instead, Durkheim continued to retain his belief in the moral supremacy of the collective, and he saw that the increasing differentiation in a modern society, paradoxically, would lead to more and more mutual dependence and create 'organic solidarity'. It was this consistent search for the basis of moral order that led him to explore the domain of religion and of the sacred, and school and moral education. In a way, in both Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim you are witnessing an endeavour to reconcile positivist sociology with social order and stability.

Positivism, it seems, is both an assertion of science as well as a quest for order and stability. Does it mean that science is yet another form of ideology? (See Unit 1, where a similar question has been answered in the affirmative.)

Let us now complete the Reflection and Action 7.1 exercise to check our own understanding of Durkheim's idea of social facts.

Reflection and Action 7.1

For Durkheim social facts are external and coercive and social facts should be treated as things to be studied through concrete expression in legal codes religious expressions, proverbs, customs etc. Based on the above notion of social facts, write on a separate sheet of paper your answers to the following questions.

Questions

- ❖ What can be given as examples, based on your own experience, to substantiate Durkheim's statement that social facts are coercive?
- ❖ Do you think that human beings are constantly seeking to escape the binding aspects of society; if they do so, in what way do they achieve this? Give examples.
- ❖ After collecting a few proverbs relating to gender relations, find out in what way do they capture the status of women?

7.5 Critiques of Positivism

Yes, in the French sociological tradition you saw the evolution and consolidation of positivism. But then it reached the other parts of the world and became a powerful sociological method. Positivism had its appeal. It sought to give a 'scientific status' to the discipline. The search for precision, objectivity, causality and value neutrality made it acceptable. This positivist social science found its logical culmination in the cult of numbers, in the mathematisation of social phenomena, in the urge to reduce qualitative human experiences into quantified statistical figures. And it has also its remarkable achievements.

But then, you can guess that not everyone can feel comfortable with positivism. First, it is possible to say that what is applicable in the domain of nature is not necessarily applicable in the domain of human society. Because, unlike nature, society consists of self reflexive agents who think, argue, contest, and through their practices and actions transform the world. Hence society cannot be subject to abstract/ universal generalisations. Positivism, it is alleged, undermines the creativity, reflexivity and agency of social actors. As you have already learnt in Unit 6, interpretative sociology was a refreshing departure from the positivist tradition.

Second, it can also be argued that the so-called 'ethical neutrality' of positivism reduces it to a mere technique, separated from moral/ political issues. And, paradoxically, it is precisely the politics of positivism. The establishment to legitimise itself often uses its scientific nature. In other words, positivism can prove to be pro-establishment, status-quoist, non-critical and non-reflexive. In the twentieth century this critique of positivism came rather sharply from critical theorists, or the adherents of the Frankfurt School Marxism. What is asserted is that science has lost its emancipatory power. Instead, science itself has become an integral component of the establishment. In fact, the experience of war, large-scale violence, the growth of fascism, the spread of the "culture industry", and the emergence of the 'authoritarian personality', in other words, the darkness of the twentieth century led these thinkers to speak of the 'dialectic of enlightenment'. No wonder, from Adorno to Horkheimer to Marcuse, the central thrust of their argument was that positivist science was nothing but a form of instrumental rationality leading to domination and manipulation of human and natural resources. They critiqued this instrumental rationality, and pleaded for a more critical, reflexive, qualitative and emancipatory social science.

Third, as you have already learnt in Unit 6, post-modernists deconstruct the very foundation of science. No wonder, for post-modernists, positivism loses its cognitive power and legitimacy. And in a way the distinction between objective science and subjective narrative gets eroded, sociology becomes yet another narrative filled with biographies and life histories, and a non-positivist/ post-modern sociology does not look fundamentally different from cultural studies!

As you understand, positivism emerged at a time when sociology was trying to establish itself as a science. And positivism continues to have its appeal (as was also pointed out at the end of Unit 4). But then, with the passage of time, with new experiences leading to disillusionment with the so called 'neutrality' of science, and with new sensitivity to reflexivity and creativity, we see the growing critique of positivism. Positivism has indeed lost much of its appeal. You can understand this changing intellectual milieu if you concentrate on the following two specific critiques of positivism.

A) Reflexive sociology resisting methodological dualism

Reflexive sociology, as put forward by Alvin W. Gouldner (1920-1980), is a meaningful alternative to positivism. Gouldner (1970), an American sociologist, wrote with a high degree of moral sensitivity, and critiqued positivism. He warned us of the methodological dualism[®] implicit in positivism. This dualism separates the knower from the known, subject from object, fact from value. Not solely that. It views that if the sociologist engages politically, emotionally and aesthetically with the object of his/ her study, the 'scientific nature' of the discipline would suffer. This cold objectivity, as Gouldner (1970: 496) would argue, is essentially an expression of alienation, that is, the alienation of the sociologist from his/her own self. It is like looking at sociological knowledge as just a piece of amoral technique.

Methodological Dualism is based upon a fear; but this is a fear not so much of those being studied as of the sociologist's *own self*. Methodological Dualism is, at bottom, concerned to constitute a strategy for coping with the feared vulnerability of the scholar's self. It strives to free him from disgust, pity, anger, from egoism or moral outrage, from his passions and interest, on the supposition that it is a bloodless and disembodied mind that works best. It also seeks to insulate the scholar from the values and interests of his other roles and commitments, on the dubious assumption that these can be anything but blinders. It assumes that feeling is the blood enemy of intelligence, and that there can be an unfeeling, unsentimental knower.

Gouldner (1970: 493), however, pleads for methodological monism[®], and asserts that the separation between the knower and the known must be overcome, because you cannot know others without knowing yourself. That is why, self-reflexivity is absolutely important. To know others a sociologist cannot simply study them, but must also listen to and confront himself/ herself. Knowing is not an impersonal effort but 'a personalised effort by whole, embodied men'. Reflexive sociology invites methodological monism, and, therefore, alters the very meaning of knowledge. It does not remain merely a piece of information. Instead, it becomes an awareness! It generates self-awareness and new sensitivity. Reflexive sociology, you would appreciate, is heavily demanding. Unlike positivist sociology in which you can remain 'neutral' and 'apolitical', reflexive sociology demands your moral commitment and ethical engagement. You cannot separate your life from your work. Gouldner (1970: 495) wrote,

Reflexive Sociology, then, is not characterised by what it studies. It is distinguished neither by the persons and the problems studied nor even by the techniques and instruments used in studying them. It is characterised, rather, by a *relationship* it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it. Reflexive sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work.

Take an example. Suppose you wish to study the phenomenon called 'slum culture'. A way of doing it is, of course, a highly positivistic/ technical research. You hire research assistants, send them to the

particular slum with a questionnaire, and instruct them to distribute copies of it after random sampling. The data you gather get classified and quantified, and you make your conclusions. These are the conclusions derived from 'hard' facts. And never do you feel the need to engage yourself as a person with the slum. In other words, your dispassionate exercise is not different from the way a mathematician solves a puzzle, or a scientist works in a lab.

Now Gouldner's reflexive sociology would oppose this kind of research. Instead, it would make you reflect on your own self and your politics and morality. Possibly you are urban, upper class, English speaking and relatively privileged. What does it mean for you to understand the slum culture? Isn't it the fact that their suffering cannot be separated from your privilege? Can you understand them without questioning this asymmetrical power? These questions born out of self-reflexivity would possibly create a new sociology which, far from objectifying the world, tries to create a new one. Possibly new trends in sociological research emanating from feminist and Dalit movements resemble this sort of reflexive sociology. Because in these research trends one sees not just technical objectivity, but essentially a high degree of empathy, an urge to understand suffering, and a striving for an alternative praxis.

B) Agency and structure: process of structuration

Another significant critique of positivism has come from Anthony Giddens, a leading sociologist of our time. Giddens' (1976) book, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, is a turning point. It is a text in which he studied the intellectual trajectory of the discipline, and negotiated with interpretative traditions, and reflexed on a set of new rules. It does offer an alternative to positivistic/ scientific sociology. Giddens is categorical about the fact that nature and human society are two different realms of enquiry. Nature is not a human production, but society is being perpetually created, renewed and altered by human agents. That is why there are limits to natural science methodology in sociology. In sociology, argues Giddens (1976: 13), 'those who still wait for a Newton are not only waiting for a train that won't arrive, they're in the wrong station altogether'. This seems to be the reason why he began his intellectual conversation with phenomenological/ ethno methodological traditions, the way these 'interpretative' sociologies seek to understand meanings, that is, the meanings that conscious human actors attach to the world, and construct their knowledge of the everyday world they live in. Although, for Giddens, there are possibilities in these traditions, we need to see beyond. Because the meaning you and I attach to the world has to be situated in a social context, and asymmetrical resources and capabilities often characterise this context. Take an example. Imagine yourself as a student in the classroom. It is, of course, true that you are not a puppet-silently performing the prescribed 'role'. Instead, you are a creative agent attaching meanings, and creating an inter-subjective world called the classroom.

But, then, there is a problem. Your agency/ freedom is not unlimited. Because differential/ unequal resources might characterise the classroom: teacher versus student. Even a simple site like the classroom is, in fact, a site of conflict and contestation. Giddens (1976), therefore, argues that interpretative sociology alone is not sufficient; it is equally important to be aware of the complex relationship between the agency and structure. This critical/ creative engagement with methodological issues led him to put forward a set of rules which can be summarised as follows.

First, sociology is not concerned with a "pre-given" universe of objects. Instead, sociology deals with a world that is constituted or provided by the active doings of subjects. It is in this sense that 'the production and reproduction of society has to be treated as a skilled performance on the part of its members' (Giddens 1976: 160). Let us understand it. Suppose you are studying a phenomenon called caste. Even a rigid system like caste, you realise, is not pre-given. Instead, human agents are perpetually creating and transforming what we call a caste society. That is why, lower caste movements or Dalit movements or divergent reforms take place, and the social reality that sociologists study remains perpetually vibrant and alive. It is a skilled performance which is in perpetual flux.

Second, although society is a skilled performance, the creativity of the social actor, as you have just learnt, is not unlimited since all of us, irrespective of our creativity, are historically located social actors, working under certain conditions. It is in this context that we ought to be aware of the limits/ constraints provided by the social structure. But then, what is interesting about Giddens (1976: 161) is that he is talking about the duality of structure[⊗]. 'Structure must not be conceptualised as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling'. An example would make this point clear. Imagine that you are speaking a language. No matter how creative you are, you cannot speak whatever you wish. You have to follow the grammar: a set of rules. But then, it is not just an experience of constraint. Language also enables you to speak. Moreover, a living language is not static; through their linguistic expressions and practices people make changes in the structure of the language. This is what Giddens (1976: 161) regards as the process of structuration[⊗] and says that for him, 'to enquire into the structuration of social practices is to seek to explain how it comes about that structures are constituted through action and, reciprocally, how action is constituted structurally'. In a way, the process of structuration enables him to overcome the duality of structure and agency. Yes, you cannot imagine yourself without the 'rules' that the structure provides. But at the same time, you are not a puppet. You can innovate, experiment, and alter the structure.

Third, Giddens asserts that a sociologist cannot escape the language that lay actors use to make sense of their world. That is why, meaningful sociological research requires immersion[⊗] in the form of life which the sociologist seeks to study. Immersion does not, however, mean that the

sociologist has to become a 'full member' of the community. This only means the ability 'to participate in it as an ensemble of practices'.

And finally, sociological concepts, asserts Giddens, are based on double hermeneutic[®]. The reason is that social actors themselves have already interpreted society as being a skilled performance, and hence the sociologists further reinterpret it within their theoretical schemes, mediating ordinary and technical language. About hermeneutics you will read in Unit 8.

These debates and contestations, you need to realise, have enriched the discipline. And it is important that you become aware of these multiple voices within the discipline.

Let us at the end of our discussion, complete the Reflection and Action 7.2 exercise.

Reflection and Action 7.2

Structures are as much constraining as enabling, people constantly innovate and interpret the given structures.

Explain the above statement with an illustration from a contemporary situation and write a short note on the process of structuration. Discuss your note with fellow learners of M A Sociology at your Study Center.

***It is a request to the Academic Counselor to organise an essay competition on this topic and send the top ten essays to the Coordinator of MSO 002. The best essay will have a surprise appearance.**

7.6 Conclusion

In Unit 7 we have discussed the antecedents of positivism in the context of tremendous strides made in the sciences and of the general milieu of Enlightenment. Auguste Comte is considered the founder of sociology for he tried to conceive of similar methodology for the social sciences and the study of society. Positivism, as we can see, had a tremendous impact on sociology and in some ways helped establish it as a discipline. The propositions and theories of Comte have, however, been refined especially in the case of Durkhiem. He, by far, has been responsible for defining the subject matter of sociology and in laying out the rules to study society. Subsequent thinkers have critiqued his visualisation of an overarching coercive society, but Durkhiem still lays out a road map for us to follow and be clear in distinguishing individual acts from societal acts. The subsequent methodologies and perspectives in sociology attempted to privilege the agency of the individual. We have discussed Giddens' work as an example of this approach. Another critique that came strongly against positivism came from Gouldner, who felt that positivism with its methodological coldness separates the knower from the known and therefore he pleads for a reflexive sociology. Many in the

social sciences, especially in social anthropology, have recommended reflexivity. The issues of who represents whom has come under severe debate not only in anthropology but also in the general debates in the social sciences. With the post-modernist critique of unilinear theories there is an increasing tendency to look for multi-vocality. The question that can be asked in this context is what relevance do theories, which support generalising tendencies, have in the globalising world?

Further Reading

Allan Kenneth 2005, *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory, Seeing the Social World*, Sage Publications (Pine Ford Press): New York.

(The book uses ideas of modernity and post-modernity to help student understand how the theoretical, historical perspectives apply to their own time period.)

Giddens, Anthony 1984. *The constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuralism*, Polity Press: Cambridge (Chapter 1 on Elements of the Theory of Structuration and Chapter 6 on Structuration Theory, Empirical Research and Social Critique)

