

Programme: Master in Sociology
Postgraduate Department of Sociology,
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Semester II

Course: CC-5 (Research Methods in Sociology)
Unit-I (Part A) Schools of Epistemology –III

Introduction

As you have seen in the earlier sections of Schools of epistemology, science with its central principles of objectivity, universalisation and causal explanation did have a tremendous impact on the formation of modern social science. This, however, does not mean that there was absolute agreement on the 'unity of method'. It is true that positivism, as a dominant mode of sociological inquiry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, did not see much qualitative difference in the study of nature and socio-cultural domain. But then, there were many who differed, and pleaded for a separate mode of inquiry in social and cultural sciences. Its roots could be seen in Immanuel Kant, one of the leading Enlightenment philosophers. While mediating on nature, he spoke of the two distinct principles – a) the physical component being enslaved by the senses, and b) the moral component that strives for truth, justice and beauty. No wonder, one aspect of the Enlightenment social theory that spoke of human beings' conditioning gave birth to material/structural analysis, and the other mode of inquiry that spoke of human beings' freedom gave importance to voluntarism, human agency, creativity and reflexivity.

Herein lies the point of departure. There are social scientists who would argue that unlike an object in the physico-chemical or biological world, the human being is a creative/reflexive creature, and human society is, therefore, a domain of meanings, not just an 'external thing' constraining us. In other words, human society, it is argued, has to be seen as a product of creative accomplishment on the part of the social actors. The task of social science is to understand and interpret these meanings. Max Weber emerged out of this philosophic tradition. For Weber (1949), sociology is an interpretative study of the subjective meaning of complex social actions. He regarded it as *verstehen*, a method of understanding the conscious/subjective meanings social actors attach to the world. It was in this sense that Weber saw beyond mere economism, and interpreted early capitalism as a domain of meanings that the proponents of Protestantism or Calvinism attached to the world.

Thus, for interpretivist, social world consist of and is constructed through meaning that need to be internalize. The meaning which we attached to the world are not static, nor universal, but always multiple and variable and constantly subject to modification and change. The research here employs hermeneutic principle; hermeneutics refer to the theory and practice of interpretation. Therefore for interpretivist, 'facts' about behaviour are always context bound. They don't apply to all people in all situations. Let us try to understand in detail through Max Weber's *Verstehen*.

Max Weber: sociology as interpretative understanding

Max Weber grew around the time when rapid development was taking place. Weber wanted to establish his theory of social action by drawing a sharp distinction between subjectively

intended and objectively valid meanings. He wanted to define sociology from the realm of social action. Sociology, for Weber, is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action, in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects. Now according to Weber, the action is social in so far as by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it. Weber in no case refers to an objectively 'correct meaning' or one which is 'true' in some metaphysical sense. It is this which distinguishes the empirical sciences of action, such as sociology from the dogmatic disciplines in that area such as jurisprudence, logic, esthetics which seek to ascertain the 'true' and 'valid' meanings.

For example—the goal of Weber's sociology of religion is to understand religious action from the subjective meaning of the actor's rationally. He was not interested in formulating the functions of religion as Marx and Durkheim did. Weber's work "The Protestant ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism" is the study of relationship between the ethics of Protestantism and the emergence of spirit of capitalism. He looks into Benjamin Franklin's illustration who writes "Time is Money, that credit is money and that money begets money". This encourages people to pay all their debts and help them to present themselves as industrious and trustworthy. Weber sees such philosophy as an ethic and the spirit of modern capitalism. Similarly Martin Luther's idea of "calling" was also considered as a product of reformation. According to it people have a duty to fulfill the obligations imposed upon them by their positions in the world. Weber, here is not arguing that Protestantism caused the capitalist spirit but rather it was one of the contributing factor. Thus, he was of the opinion that one dimensional rationalization is going to make the present society stagnant. The spirit of individual freedom and values pertaining to enlightenment were fast fading. Capitalism although emerged in Germany late was lagging behind when compared with nations like Holland, England and America. Hence in order to catch up with the advanced industrial nations Germany created a nexus with the political parties and the capitalists that due to the preponderance of bureaucracy and rationalism stunted the creativity and free flow of individuals and their development. Max Weber known more as a historical sociologist than a social scientist was a pioneer in invoking the concept of 'verstehen'. Weber was of the opinion that not all actions should be studied but only those which are oriented towards something or someone. For example removing the hand when placed by mistake on the surface of a hot utensil is a reflexive action. On the other hand taking into account the action and the subjective meaning attached to it of an individual and responding meaningfully is known as interpretative understanding. Weber was of the view that the method 'verstehen' equips the individual with understanding the subjective meaning of an action. At the same time Weber was also of the opinion that the sense and the meaning that an action tries to project should always be understood within the configuration of a particular social setting. For example a student smiling while the teacher is narrating a sad story might appear weird. But if looked at it closely then we shall find that the student is a boy who has finally held the attention of the girl who he likes and is trying to impress her by smiling. Hence responses, the social settings, particular norms valued in that specific social setting and motivations should be taken into account for meaningful interpretation.

Well, Weber did speak of the human agency. But this does not mean that his sociology was 'subjective' in nature. Instead, he sought to unite the interpretative study of subjective meanings with an objective causal analysis. He was not against the basic tenets of science: objectivity, value neutrality and causal explanation. What he was objecting to was the positivist

urge to equate society with nature, and undermine the domain of meanings. He was therefore talking about 'ideal types', which were more like models rather than exact scientific laws.

Interpretative Sociology in Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century the tradition of interpretative sociology was further developed through phenomenological and ethno-methodological traditions. The central trust of these traditions is that the world is largely a world experienced by human beings, and the task of social science is to describe, understand and make sense of this world: how people themselves define and construct it. Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), a major proponent of the phenomenological tradition, spoke of the inter-subjective world in which people interact, communicate and understand one another through the process of typification: a process that enables people to fix and define one another, and have a shared role-expectation. It is through this process of typification, that a meaningful and stable social order is possible. For Schutz (1972) the everyday world in which people interact is the *paramount reality*. It is taken for granted. And that makes society possible. But then, there are other realms, like the realm of dreams, or the realm of scientific theorizing, in which people experience the world. All these finite provinces of meaning have their own notions of time and space, and shifts from one realm to the other involve 'shock'. But then, for Schutz (1972), the paramount reality is most important, and all of us have to come back to it and experience the world as direct/real actors. Sociology, for Schutz, must describe and understand how people experience the world. This means that sociology must take people's descriptions and definitions seriously.

It is in this sense that sociological constructs are 'second order constructs'. Likewise, Harold Garfinkel (1967) spoke of ethno-methodology, or 'people's methodology'. The task is to describe how people themselves define their world, not to explain it in terms of some context-free, abstract, universal generalisation. In other words, in these traditions you are witnessing a shift from abstract explanation to meaningful understanding, from universality to specificity, from theory to description, from structural causes to people's lived experiences.

Conclusion

The two traditions of social science, positivist and interpretative, have a point of convergence, because both these traditions emerged out of Enlightenment modernity. In the positivist tradition you can see the Enlightenment affirmation of the legitimacy of scientific explanation. And in the interpretative tradition you can find the affirmation of the Enlightenment optimism centered on human beings' agency and their ability to create their own world.

But these very foundations are in a crisis, since all these modern principles, scientific objectivity, historical progress, coherent/rational self, and the agency/freedom of the actor, are doubted, particularly with the advent of post modernity. And it has caused a severe philosophic crisis, and sociology has to cope with it. In the next section we will discuss about this new emerging school of epistemology, that is, postmodernist.