

## **Masters of sociology**

### **Semester-2**

### **Unit-1**

### **Paper-CC-5**

## **Sociology as science**

### **Part-C**

#### **THE SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD**

Having defined the subject matter of sociology, Durkheim describes the method to study it. His sociological method rests firmly on the experience of biology, which had emerged by then as a science of living beings.

#### **Rules for the Observation of Social Facts**

The first rule that Durkheim (1950:14) gives us is: “consider social facts as things”. Social facts are real. However instead of being dealt with as things, as concrete realities worthy of direct attention and study, they have been dealt with by other writers in the light of concepts or notions. This is true of all sciences before they emerge as disciplines — thought and reflection precede science. The pre-scientific stage is broken by the introduction of the **empirical** method and not by conceptual discussion alone. This is perhaps even more important in social science than in natural science because there is a strong tendency to treat social facts as either lacking in substantive reality (as creations of the individual will) or, on the contrary, as already wholly known words like ‘democracy’, ‘socialism’ etc. are freely used as if they denoted precisely known facts, whereas actually “they awaken in us nothing but confused ideas, a tangle of vague impressions, prejudices and emotions” (Durkheim 1950: 22). To counter these tendencies, Durkheim said that social facts must be treated as ‘things’. As ‘things’ they have to be studied by the empirical method and not direct intuition; and also, they cannot be modified by a simple effort of the will. While

studying social facts as 'things' the following three rules have to be followed in order to be objective.

i) All preconceptions must be eradicated. Sociologists must emancipate themselves from the common place ideas that dominate the mind of the layperson and adopt an emotionally neutral attitude towards what they set out to investigate.

ii) Sociologists have to formulate the concepts precisely. At the outset of the research the sociologists are likely to have very little knowledge of the phenomenon in question. Therefore they must proceed by conceptualising their subject matter in terms of those properties which are external enough to be observed. Thus in Division of Labour the type of solidarity in a society can be perceived by looking at the type of law — repressive or restitutive, criminal or civil — which is dominant in the society.

iii) When sociologists undertake the investigation of some order of social facts they must consider them from an aspect that is independent of their individual manifestations. The objectivity of social facts depends on their being separated from individual facts, which express them. Social facts provide a common standard for members of the society. Social facts exist in the form of legal rules, moral regulations, proverbs, social conventions, etc. It is these that sociologists must study to gain an understanding of social life. Social facts are seen in "currents of opinion", which vary according to time and place, impel certain groups either to more marriages, for example, or to more suicides, or to a higher or lower birth rate, etc. These currents are plainly social facts. At first sight they seem inseparable from the forms they take in individual cases. But statistics furnish us with the means of isolating them. They are, in fact, represented with considerable exactness by the rates of births, marriages and suicides. Social currents are theoretical variables, while statistical rates are the means of obtaining verification for propositions referring to these variables.

Recognising the fact that social currents are not observable he insists that 'devices of method' must be introduced in order that empirical verification be made possible. It must be noted here that the case of the 'suicide rates' is the best example given by Durkheim of the way in which social facts can be studied.

### **Rules for Distinguishing between the Normal and the Pathological**

Having given us rules for the observation of social facts, Durkheim makes a distinction between 'normal' and 'pathological' social facts. He considers these

aspects important because, as he points out, the scientific study of human beings has been held back to a large degree by the tendency of many writers to consider as 'pathological' forms of behaviour, which were different from their own. But Durkheim (1950: 64) explains that the social fact is considered to be normal when it is understood in the context of the society in which it exists. He further adds that a social fact, which is 'general' to a given type of society, is 'normal' when it has utility for that societal type. As an illustration he cites the case of crime. We consider crime as pathological. But Durkheim argues that though we may refer to crime as immoral because it flouts values we believe in from a scientific viewpoint it would be incorrect to call it abnormal. Firstly because crime is present not only in the majority of societies of one particular type but in all societies of all types. Secondly, if there were not occasional deviances or floutings of norms, there would be no change in human behaviour and equally important, no opportunities through which a society can either reaffirm the existing norms, or else reassess such behaviour and modify the norm itself. To show that crime is useful to the normal evolution of morality and law, Durkheim cites the case of Socrates, who according to Athenian law was a criminal, his crime being the independence of his thought. But his crime rendered a service to his country because it served to prepare a new morality and faith, which the Athenians needed. It also rendered a service to humanity in the sense that freedom of thought enjoyed by people in many countries today was made possible by people like him. Durkheim was impressed by the way study of medicine had become scientific. The doctors study the normal working of the body and its pathological features. The study of both of these features helps one identify the nature of the body. He applied this method to study social facts. In his study of division of labour in society, he explained the normal features in the first two parts, and the abnormal features in the third part of the book. He considered crime and punishment both as normal. How is a social fact normal? When the rate of crime exceeds what is more or less constant for a given social type, then it becomes an abnormal or pathological fact. Similarly, using the same criteria, suicide is a normal social fact (though it may be regarded as 'wrong' or 'immoral' because it goes against a set of values that makes preservation of life absolute). But the sudden rise in the suicide rate in western Europe during the nineteenth century was a cause for concern for Durkheim and one of the reasons why he decided to study this phenomenon.

### **Rules for the Classification of Social Types**

There have been two opposing conceptions of collective life among scholars. Some historians hold that each society is unique and so we cannot compare societies. On the other hand philosophers hold that all societies belong to one species - the human species and it is from the general attributes of human nature that all social evolution flows. Durkheim takes an intermediary position. He speaks of social species or social types. Though there is so much of diversity in social facts, it does not mean that they cannot be treated scientifically i.e. compared, classified and explained. If on the other hand, we speak of only one species we will be missing out in important qualitative differences and it will be impossible to draw them together. Classification of societies into types is an important step towards explanation as problems and their explanations will differ for each type. It is also needed to decide whether a social fact is normal or abnormal, since a social fact is normal or abnormal only in relation to a given social type. Durkheim uses the term 'social morphology' for the classification of social types. The question is, how are social type constituted? The word "type" means the common characteristics of several units in a group e.g. "bachelors" and "married persons" belong to two types, and Durkheim was able to show that suicide rates are found more among the 'bachelors'. Please do not apply this to individual cases. We must study each particular society completely and then compare these to see the similarities and differences. Accordingly, we can classify them. Durkheim (1950: 78) asked, "Is it not the rule in science to rise to the general only after having observed the particular and that too in its entirety?" In order to know whether a fact is general throughout a species or social type, it is not necessary to observe all societies of this social type; only a few will suffice. According to Durkheim (1950: 80), "Even one well made observation will be enough in many cases, just as one well constructed experiment often suffices for the establishment of a law" Durkheim wants societies to be classified according to their degree of organisation, taking as a basis the 'perfectly simple society' or the 'society of one segment' like the '**horde**'. Hordes combine to form aggregates which one could call 'simple **polysegmental**'. These combine to form polysegmental societies simply compounded'. A union of such societies would result in still more complex societies called 'polysegmental societies doubly compounded' and so on. Within these types one will have to distinguish different varieties according to whether a complete fusion of the initial segments does or does not appear. Regarding Durkheim's procedure of classifying societies into social species or

types, John Rex examines the usefulness of this 'biological approach to sociological investigations'. He finds out cases where biological approaches would be useful in sociological investigations, and where it could become difficult. Cases of the first type are exercises in description, classification and formulation of average types. Difficulties occur in the use of biological approach to sociological investigations when history of societies becomes the subject matter of study. In such cases 'species' are discovered by authors out of the historical process; and a theory of evolution is therefore less helpful here

### **10.4.3 Rules for the Explanation of Social Facts**

There are two approaches, which may be used in the explanation of social facts - the causal and the functional.

i) **Why:** The former is concerned with explaining 'why' the social phenomenon in question exists. The latter involves establishing the "correspondence between the fact under consideration and the general needs of the social organism, and in what this correspondence consists" The causes, which give rise to a given social fact, must be identified separately from whatever social functions it may fulfil. Normally, one would try to establish causes before specifying functions. This is because knowledge of the causes, which bring a phenomenon into being, can under certain circumstances allow us to derive some insight into its possible functions. Although 'cause' and 'function' have a separate character this does not prevent a reciprocal relation between the two and one can start either way. Infact Durkheim sees a sense in the beginning of his study of division of labour with functions in Part I and then coming to causes in Part II. Let us take an example of 'punishment' from the same work. Crime offends collective sentiments in a society, while the function of punishment is to maintain these sentiments at the same degree of intensity. If offences against them were not punished, the strength of the sentiments necessary for social unity would not be preserved.

ii) **How:** Having distinguished between the two approaches to explain social facts, Durkheim's next concern is to determine the method by which they may be developed. The nature of social facts determines the method of explaining these facts. Since the subject matter of sociology has a social character, it is collective in nature, the explanation should also have a social character. Durkheim draws a sharp line between individual and society. Society is a separate reality from the individuals who compose it. It has its own characteristics. There exists a line between psychology and sociology. Any

attempt to explain social facts directly in terms of individual characteristics or in terms of psychology would make the explanation false. Therefore in the case of causal explanation “the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness”. In the case of functional explanation “the function of a social fact ought always to be sought in its relation to some social end” The final point about Durkheim’s logic of explanation is his stress upon the comparative nature of social science. To show that a given fact is the cause of another “we have to compare cases in which they are simultaneously present or absent, to see if the variations they present in these different combinations of circumstances indicate that one depends on the other” Since sociologists normally do not conduct laboratory-controlled experiments but study reported facts or go to the field and observe social facts, which have been spontaneously produced, they use the method of indirect experiment or the comparative method. Durkheim, following J.S. Mill’s System of Logic, refers appreciatively to the ‘method of concomitant variations’ as the procedure of the comparative method. He calls it ‘the instrument par excellence of sociological research’. For this method to be reliable, it is not necessary that all the variables differing from those which we are comparing to be strictly excluded. The mere parallel between the two phenomena found in a sufficient number and variety of cases is an evidence that a possible relationship exists between them. Its validity is due to the fact that the concomitant variations display the causal relationship not by coincidence but intrinsically. It shows them as mutually influencing each other in a continuous manner, at least so far as their quality is concerned. Constant concomitance, according to Durkheim, is a law in itself whatever may be the condition of the phenomena excluded from the comparison. When two phenomena vary directly with each other, this relationship must be accepted even when in, certain cases, one of these phenomena should be present without the other. For it may be either that the cause has been prevented from producing its effect by the action of some contrary cause or that it is present but in a form different from the one previously observed. For example, if a plant receives direct sunlight it grows straight but when the same plant is given indirect sunlight it bends towards that light. This shows the concomitant variation of plant growth and its relation to sunlight. Of course we need to re examine the facts but we must not abandon hastily the results of a methodically conducted demonstration. Concomitant variation can be done at different levels - single society, several societies of the same species of social type, or several distinct

social species. However to explain completely a social institution belonging to a given social species, one will have to compare its different forms not only among the societies belonging to that social type but in all preceding species as well. Thus to explain the present state of the family, marriage, property, etc. it would be necessary to know their origins and the elements of which these institutions are composed. This would require us to study this institution in earlier types of society from the time domestic organisation was in its most rudimentary form to its progressive development in different social species. “One cannot explain a social fact of any complexity except by following its complete development through all social species” This would show us the separate elements composing it since we could see the process of accretion. We would also be able to determine the conditions on which their formation depends. The comparative method is the very framework of the science of society for Durkheim. According to Durkheim (1950: 139), “comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in-so-far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for fact”.

#### **LET US SUM UP**

To sum up our discussion of Durkheim’s conception of sociology we may say that Durkheim clearly considered sociology to be an independent scientific discipline with its distinct subject matter. He distinguished it from psychology. He identified social facts, laid down rules for their observation and explanation. He stressed on social facts being explained through other social facts. For him explanation meant the study of functions and causes. The causes could be derived through the use of the comparative method .He demonstrated the nature of these studies through the study of division of labour in different types of solidarities, of suicide-rates in different types of societies, and the study of Religion in a single type. His life and works are regarded as a sustained effort at laying the legitimate base of sociology as a discipline. Further, it follows the empiricist method, which is valid in the natural sciences, biology in particular, observation, classification and explanation through the help of ‘laws’ arrived by means of the comparative method.

[Email-artirani21nov@gmail.com](mailto:Email-artirani21nov@gmail.com)

Contact-6200360965