

PIONEERS/SCHOLARS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a relatively new academic discipline. It emerged in the early 19th century in response to the challenges of modernity (discussed above). Increasing mobility and technological advances resulted in the increasing exposure of people to cultures and societies different from their own. The impact of this exposure was varied, but for some people it included the breakdown of traditional norms and customs and warranted a revised understanding of how the world works. Sociologists responded to these changes by trying to understand what holds social groups together and also explore possible solutions to the breakdown of social solidarity. Prominent among the many sociological scholars are the following;

AUGUSTE COMTE (1798-1857)

Auguste Comte was among the first thinkers to apply scientific methods to understand society. Comte hoped to unify all the sciences under sociology; he believed sociology held the potential to improve society and direct human activity, including the other sciences. He sought to create a science of society that could explain the laws governing the social world that could help put problems to an end that were encountered in Europe.

Comte believed that all sciences share a common logic and scientific method aimed at revealing universal laws. Hence, he viewed sociology as a positive science applying rigorous methods. Therefore, he argued that sociology should be aimed at discovering laws that govern the operation of human society, laws like those discovered by natural scientists that govern the natural world employing the same methods as those used by natural scientists. In coming up with this new discipline, his argument was that it should be based on observation, experimentation and comparison.

The law of three stages

Since Comte was concerned with explaining laws governing the social world, he came up with a number of theories. Among them is the theory of the **theory of the law of three stages**. Comte, not unlike other enlightenment thinkers, believed society developed in stages. This law states that each branch of knowledge passes through three periods of development;

- a. The first was the **theological (fictitious) stage**; During this stage, phenomena are interpreted in terms of supernatural power. This is where people took a religious view of society. Comte saw that for along time human beings interpreted life around them in terms of objects which were worshiped and thought to have powers over people and nature. These objects or fetishes were many. In due course, the multiplicity of fetishes were found to be confusing and this, somehow, gave way to the birth of polytheism (worship of many gods). The resulting gods represented different aspects of life. There was a god of love, god of hate, god of wind etc. Later, according to Comte, the existence of too many gods produced contradictory interpretations among the believers. In this way, polytheism became mentally unsatisfactory and worship of

only one god, the God Almighty, developed. This worship which came to be known as *monotheism* marked the climax of the theological type of thinking. In terms of social organization, Auguste Comte observed that each of the three types of thinking determines and corresponds to a particular way in which society is organized. Comte 'declared that theological thinking leads to a military and monarchical social organization, with God at the head of the hierarchy as King of Kings and a might warrior, and with human beings arranged in a military organization'. Guides to social behaviour in this type of society are divine rules enforced by leaders believed to have been put in positions of leadership by God.

- b.** The second was the **metaphysical stage**; this is where people understood society as natural (not supernatural). Auguste Comte argued that just as each sub-stage of theological thinking grew out of the proceeding one, the rise of the metaphysical stage did not occur until the potentialities of the theological stage to explain phenomena were exhausted. In the process, people began to lose faith in religious explanations. Many of them started to feel that blind faith in those explanations was not appropriate for understanding social and natural phenomena. So, they increasingly emphasized questioning and reasoning. It was the increasing emphasis on rationalism that brought about the metaphysical stage of thinking. Phenomena came to be explained in terms of non-religious forces which were assumed to exist in nature and human society. With respect to social organization, under the metaphysical stage there is greater individual freedom. However, religious leaders and legal practitioners assume their positions as moral guides in society.
- c.** The last stage was the **scientific/positivist stage**; later, metaphysical thinking too became unsatisfactory. Reliance on pure reasoning appeared unsatisfactory. More and more people called for concrete proof of support explanations arising out reasoning. The final result was birth of the scientific or positive stage of thinking which he believed to be the pinnacle of social development. In the scientific stage, society would be governed by reliable knowledge and would be understood in light of the knowledge produced by science, primarily sociology. Comte declared further that positive thinking produces an industrial society. To him, this is a society in which the rulers are industrial managers and scientists. The main guides to social behaviour become recommendations from scientists. According to Comte, scientific moral guides prevail in the industrial society. Comte's analysis of types of thinking was based on a biological analogy. This is particularly clear from his view that just as a person (a person being an organism) starts by being a believer in childhood, becomes a critical rationalist of metaphysician in adolescence, and a down to earth or realistic philosopher in adulthood, so does society to the global community as a whole pass through the three types of thinking.

(ii) Normative Theory

Auguste Comte became convinced that in the coming industrial era there would be more positive thinking. In view of this, he formulated a normative theory, as a plan for the coming era. It is about Comte's view of the coming era or the picture that he had about society in future. According to this theory, society was to be directed by scientists, sociologists to be precise, as the new spiritual leaders and by leaders of banks and industry. The spiritual leaders would be at the head of a mere religion. They would all be sociologist-priests.

Like their Catholic predecessors in the theological stage, the sociologist-priests would be the moral guides and censors of community life, for they would have acquired positive knowledge of what is good or bad. Concerning sociologists, he argued that they were well placed in society because of their rich understanding of society and good morals.

In Comte's view, the coming industrial society would be characterized by love, order and progress. Egoistic tendencies that have daunted human beings would be replaced by altruism, the commandment of live for others. Human beings would have strong love for one another.

(iii) Social Change

Social change, as seen by Comte, does not take place smoothly. His ideals concerning how society changes can be found in **social statics** and **social dynamics**. Social Statics was perceived as a study of factors that make the existence of society possible while dynamics was taken as a study of factors that explain social change. Social change to him therefore, was seen to proceed by alternating "**organic**" and "**critical**" periods.

In organic periods, these are periods of social stability and intellectual harmony. Critical periods are periods of social change. In critical periods traditions are undermined and society moves into fundamental disequilibrium.

(a) Statics

Auguste Comte felt that what basically accounts for stability of society is consensus. He used a French term 'consensus univerealise' which literary means universal consensus. For social order to prevail in society, as seen by Comte, there must be consensus in the area of scientific knowledge, in the arts, within political institutions, in the area of traditional beliefs, etc.

Although society was seen to comprise individuals, families, and social combinations (the highest of which being the entire humanity), Comte felt that this consensus must be at least at the level of the family. He excluded the individual from sociological analysis. To him, the basic social unit is the family, not the individual. Hence, he wrote at some point that society, as a collective organism is essentially composed of families which are true elements, of classes and castes which form its true tissue

and finally cities and townships which are its true organs'. Apart from consensus, factors which were seen to hold society together were language division of labour, and religion.

Language was seen as the medium through which the culture of the proceeding generation is transmitted to the present, thus making the people feel linked even to their remote ancestors. Besides, by participating in a language, people are made to feel part of their current society. Language develops a sense of togetherness among people. Comte stressed that without a common language; people would never attain solidarity and consensus; that without a common language, no social order is possible.

A common religious belief is another important factor that binds people together in society. The reasons given were that religion: (a) it permits individuals to overcome their egoistic tendencies and to be guided by love of their fellow members of Society; and (b) it enables governments to rule. Regarding the latter point, Comte wrote that: every government supposes a religion to consecrate and regulate commandment and obedience.

The third factor that was seen to bind people together is division of labour. Comte showed that while the division of labour fosters the development of individual capabilities, it contributes to human solidarity by creating in each individual a sense of dependence on other individuals. Therefore, social statics are dominant during the organic periods.

(b) Dynamics

Social dynamics are factors that account for social change and are more pronounced during critical periods. Auguste Comte maintained that one factor that produces social change is intellectual progress which, in turn, is caused by factors such as bore down (which tends to produce an innovation) and fear of death. The idea that intellectual development produces social change led him to establish a number of correlations between stages of intellectual development and 'stages in the development of human material life, types of social units, types of social order, and prevailing sentiments'.

Comte explained that 'consensus universalize' is usually absent on intellectual matters, the reason being that in early all ages there have been a mixture of sciences which have reached the positive stage and those which have only reached the metaphysical. In Comte's view, there has been only one historical period with complete intellectual harmony. The period was that of pure fetishism, the original period when all phenomena were explained in terms of powers believed to be with objects of worship. Since then, there as been a mixed development of the sciences, giving rise to differences in ways of thinking during the various epochs. The differences in ways of thinking, Conte maintained, has been one of the forces behind social change. He held a view that social change would come to an end only when positivism becomes

the accepted way of thinking throughout humanity. At that time there would be universal consensus on explanations of phenomena and consequent human actions, as was the case in the original period of pure fetishism.

Fine, but why do contemporary societies develop differently? Is it because of different levels of thinking in these societies? Comte's answer was that three factors account for the variation in development: race, climate, and political action. Comte felt that each race of people has a characteristic predominance of certain attitudes or predispositions. According to him, different races have not developed the same way because they do not have the same predispositions. While, for example, the black race was seen to have been characterized primarily by a predominance of affectivity, other races were seen not to be so endowed.

Turning to climate, Auguste Comte saw that each society had to overcome a different set of natural climate conditions. While some societies had more or less favourable conditions. The different climatic conditions, he said, partly explained why some societies were more advanced than others. Regarding political action, Comte saw that this type of action might accelerate or retard progress.

Critique

His law of three stages can be criticized, for in the real world there appears to be a mixture of the three types of thinking. There are still people who think in terms of spirits and powers of these spirits over human affairs. This is especially the case in developing countries like Zambia. Besides, monotheistic theological thinking is still strong, as can be induced from international travels of evangelists and the presence of churches almost everywhere in the world. Theological thinking has not been superseded by metaphysical or positive ones. There are also people who continue to think in terms of metaphysical doctrines, otherwise we would not find such world-wide organizations as "The Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis", or AMORC in short. The doctrine taught by this particular organization, which is based in California in the United States of America, is about natural laws and principles of the universe and how these affect human beings.

Comte showed that religion has a number of useful functions for society. The functions include providing an individual with an object of devotion and a meaning of life. It also serves society as a source of unity, consensus, and makes the social order look legitimate. At the same time, he explained that none of the existing forms of religion could perform these functions in the coming positive era. Therefore, he set out to establish a new positive religion for humanity. Priests of the new religion would be sociologists who would be basing their actions on a scientific study of society.

This effort to establish a new religion of humanities has attracted considerable criticism. Despite the fact that in some quarters

'There have been some sympathetic comments on Comte's religion of Humanity' some social scientists have even gone as far as saying that his involvement with this kind of religion has discredited his works. Comte, nevertheless, has made a number of undisputable contributions to sociology. His idea of functioning as useful activity for the well-being of society is today a key idea of the school of sociological functionalism. This idea has been a lasting contribution to sociology.

Comte showed that progress in society could be accelerated through political action based on positive knowledge. Today this perception continues to be shared by many international development agencies and financial organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund Field Missions to countries to do empirical investigations and, on that basis, provide policy advice for possible political action. A host of other organizations continue to share in this way the perception that political action based on scientific knowledge could accelerate progress in society. Lastly, Comte is recognized as founder of the discipline of sociology. The founding of the discipline is in itself an important contribution that he made.

HERBERT SPENCER (1820-1903)

Herbert Spencer was born in Derby, England, in 1820. Until the age of thirteen, he was tutored by his father at home. He subsequently moved to his uncle's home in Bath, where his private education continued. Except for a few months of formal education, Spencer never really attended school outside his family. Still, he received a very solid education in mathematics and science from his father and uncle, and this technical education, in the end, encouraged him to view himself as a philosopher and to propose a grand project for uniting ethics, natural science, and social science. This great project was termed Synthetic Philosophy, an indication that Spencer's work moved far beyond the disciplinary border of sociology. Only rather late in his career (between 1873 and 1896) did he turn his attention to sociology. He thought big in a time when the intellectual world in general, and academia in particular, was specializing and compartmentalizing. Herbert Spencer is recognized as the second founding father of sociology. In his writings, he emphasized analyzing society in terms of biological analogies. His work can be summarized in two related propositions. The first one is that evolution is universal that it occurs in inorganic, organic, and social worlds. The second proposition is that human society is like a biological organism.

(i) THE DOCTRINE OF EVOLUTION

In 1852, Herbert Spencer put forward some ideas related to the development of human society. He looked at how society develops or evolves. Spencer started by arguing that evolution is universal, meaning that it occurs in all Worlds: in inorganic, organic and super-organic Worlds. The organic world is the world of living things, inorganic world is the world of non-living things and the

super-organic is the social World of human beings. Spencer explained that all these Worlds go through a process of increasing differentiation and of integration, that there is tendency of something homogenous to become heterogeneous or multiform and for the differentiated parts to become integrated on a new basis.

In the case of human society, Spencer referred to population growth as a major factor in the development from a homogeneous group grows in population size, the homogeneity starts to disappear. The society becomes differentiated in terms of work. Division of labour sets in under the impact of population growth.

The emerging division of labor brings about a new dependence of people on each other. The specialization means that each person cannot produce all requirements for personal subsistence, and so dependence on other producers become inevitable. Spencer went on to say that when the differentiation proceeds, some people came to specialize in performing regulating functions to ensure that the new social system is coordinated. The society thus becomes united on a new basis. This process of social evolution, according to Spencer, has produced societies of different degrees of complexity, such that there have been: simple societies; compound societies; doubly compound societies; and trebly compound societies.

A simple society comprises families, a compound society comprises families joined together to form tribes, a doubly compound society consist of clans unified into tribes, and a trebly compound society is made of tribes which have been unified into nations or states. He claimed that important principles in the development of human society are: Struggle for existence; and Survival of the fittest.

Survival of the fittest

In his analysis, unlike Charles Darwin, Spencer applied the theory of evolution to the development of human society. In fact, Spencer is the one who coined the concept of survival of the fittest. Darwin only expanded it and made it more popular with the concepts of natural selection and adaptation. He however also adopted Darwin's ideals to his theories, using the concept of adaptation. Spencer saw that the principle of survival of the fittest has a beneficial effect on humanity as a whole. He observed in particular that the general level of intelligence would rise as only those with superior intelligence survive the struggle for existence.

Under survival of the fittest, Spencer claimed that the rich and powerful were better adapted to the social and economic climate of their time. He further argued that it was natural, normal and proper for the powerful/rich to thrive and prosper at the expense of the weak/poor. To him survival of the fittest was morally correct. He argued that the weak/poor in society should not be prevented from dying out and that they form a very dangerous class in society. To him diseases were a punishment to the poor/weak imposed by society for them to die out and nothing should be done to help the poor. He also argued that the weak members inherited

traits of laziness; stupidity and immorality form their predecessors while the rich inherited traits of industriousness, strong desire to own property and ability to accumulate wealth.

Spencer went on to say that this beneficial process of natural selection would be distorted if governments are allowed to move away from their appropriate roles. He identified only two roles of the government; these roles are to: protect rights of the individual from interference from other individuals; and protect the society from external enemies. Otherwise, the state should leave individuals free to pursue their private interests. They should even be left free to enter into contracts with each other and do business. According to Spencer, when governments take on roles that go against the freedom of the individual, intellectual progress is adversely affected and a progressive deterioration of the human race may set in.

(ii) THE ORGANIC ANALOGY

As indicated above, the second of Herbert Spencer's main propositions was that society is like a biological organism. Just like a living organism is made up of different parts like the head, arms legs and so on, so is society. Society according to him is made up of different parts and systems that work together for the betterment of the whole. But what similarities did he see between society and a biological organism? Spencer saw many similarities. The main ones were that: growth is by increasing complexity of structure; there is interdependence of parts in the structure; and that the life of the whole is far longer than the life of any of the constituent parts.

However, he was mindful of ways in which human society and a biological organism is different, but he felt that three differences are superficial. Therefore, he went ahead to analyze society as if

it was a biological organism. Some of the perceived superficial differences were that; society has no physical body; elements of society do not form a continuous whole as is the case in an organism; the constituent parts of society are not stationary and fixed in their relative positions; and consciousness in society is not concentrated in one place, but in many places.

Spencer proceeded to analyze society in terms of the organic analogy. He found, inter alia, that: The productive industries of society form a system similar to the alimentary system of an organism, that the industries are the food systems; The transport system of society is like the circulatory system of an organism; and as in an organism, society has dominant centres and subordinate centres; the centres of government are dominant and play the adjudicating role when, for instance, differences arise between producers and consumers.

Critique

Herbert Spencer's ideas attracted considerable attention. Many people accepted them, especially that they provided a scientific justification of laissez-faire, a dominant ideology at the time in England and Western Europe generally, as well in the United States of America. This doctrine was against state intervention in people's economic affairs. In today's World, many of his ideas are still acceptable. On the organic analogy, there is the idea that each part of society has specific functions to perform, functions that contribute to the continued existence of the whole society. This view is still acceptable today and is being used in social research.

Some of Spencer's contemporaries, however, thinkers like T.H. Huxley, took issue with use of the organic analogy in trying to understand life in human society. They felt that human beings are not superficially but fundamentally different from other animals, especially that: they alter their environment to a far greater extent than animals; and they live in a moral World unlike animals. Besides, the latter point about morals made the early critics feel that in practice the principle of survival of the fittest does not work the same way among human beings as among animals. They argued that even in the field of economics, this principle does not operate as it does among animals, for economic competition does not take place outside moral rules (rules of what is right and what is wrong).

Indeed, from different parts of the World there have been recorded cases where individual survival has been sacrificed on moral grounds. In India, for example, it has been observed that according to custom, many a time a widow has been seen voluntarily walking up to and eventually lying beside the body of her dead husband and wait to be buried together. Such evidence suggests that the principle of survival of the fittest does not work among people as among animals.

Lastly, there is a criticism that his ideas amount to a philosophical theory rather than a sociological one. To some people, Spencer had formulated a theory of the entire universe instead of a sociological theory, since his law of evolution is cosmic, not social. Timasheff and Theodoreson are among those who criticize this way. Here is what they have written on the matter:

"Spencer's theory, contrary to Comte's, was not sociological theory as it is understood today. Comte has formulated a basic theory of social reality and tried to describe and explain social facts in terms of that limited theory. But Spencer's ambition was higher. He formulated an integral theory of all reality. His law of evolution is cosmic. His theory is therefore essentially philosophical, not sociological".

However, this criticism appears weak, for he did make sociological propositions. An example is his proposition about population growth and change from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous society. The proposition that human society is like a biological organism is also sociological; especially

that it was meant and used to understand the nature of this society.

The classification of human societies into simple, compound, doubly compound, and trebly compound by using the concepts family, clan, tribe, and nation is sociological too. In our view, applying to society the supposedly universal principles of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest does not make Spencer's propositions on society non sociological.

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