Module 7  Key Thinkers

Lecture 37  
Emile Durkheim and Max Weber

Sociology as a Discipline and Social Facts

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) is considered one of the "fathers" of sociology because of his effort to establish sociology as a discipline distinct from philosophy and psychology. This effort is evident in the two main themes that permeate Durkheim's work: the priority of the social over the individual and the idea that society can be studied scientifically. Durkheim's concept of social facts, in particular, differentiates sociology from philosophy and psychology. Social facts are the social structures and cultural norms and values that are external to, and coercive over, individuals. Social facts are not attached to any particular individual; nor are they reducible to individual consciousness. Thus, social facts can be studied empirically. According to Durkheim, two different types of social facts exist: material and immaterial. Durkheim was most interested in studying the latter, particularly morality, collective conscience, collective representation, and social currents.

The Division of Labour

In this work Durkheim discusses how modern society is held together by a division of labour that makes individuals dependent upon one another because they specialize in different types of work. Durkheim is particularly concerned about how the division of labour changes the way that individuals feel they are part of society as a whole. Societies with little division of labour (i.e., where people are self-sufficient) are unified by mechanical solidarity; all people engage in similar tasks and thus have similar responsibilities, which builds a strong collective conscience. Modern society, however, is held together by organic solidarity (the differences between people), which weakens collective conscience. Durkheim studied these different types of solidarity through laws. A society with mechanical solidarity is characterized by repressive law, while a society with organic solidarity is characterized by restitutive law.

Suicide

Durkheim's goal to differentiate sociology from psychology is perhaps best seen in this work on how social facts can be used to explain suicide rates. This work is also important because of the historical comparative method that Durkheim uses to show that that suicide rates vary across societies and over time. According to Durkheim, suicide cannot simply be explained by individual psychological problems—otherwise suicide rates would be static. Durkheim argues that two social facts, in particular, influence suicide rates: integration, or the strength of attachment people feel to society, and regulation, or the degree of external constraint on people. Durkheim distinguishes between four types of suicide that correlate to these two social facts. Egoistic suicide is a result of a lack of integration; altruistic suicide is a result of too much integration; anomic suicide is a result of too little regulation; and fatalistic suicide is a result of too much regulation.
Elementary Forms of Religious Life

This is perhaps Durkheim's most complex work, as he attempts to provide both a sociology of religion and a theory of knowledge. In this work, Durkheim studies primitive society to demonstrate that an enduring quality of all religions, even the most modern, is the differentiation between the sacred and the profane. The sacred is created through rituals, and what is deemed sacred is what morally binds individuals to society. This moral bond then becomes, according to Durkheim, a cognitive bond that shapes the categories we use to understand the social world.

The development of religion is not simply based on the differentiation between the sacred and the profane, but also on religious beliefs, rituals, and the church. The latter two conditions are particularly important to Durkheim because they connect the individual to the social; individuals learn about the sacred and religious beliefs through participating in rituals and the church. The most primitive form of religion is totemism, which is connected to the least complex form of social organization, the clan. The totem is the actual representation of the clan—it is the material representation of the nonmaterial, collective morality of the clan.

Totemism is important to Durkheim's theory of knowledge in that it is one of his categories of understanding: classification. Other categories of understanding include time, space, force, causality, and totality. These six categories may be abstract concepts, but they are all derived from social experiences, particularly rituals. Durkheim acknowledges that it is possible for moral and cognitive categories to change or be created anew through what he calls collective effervescence, or periods of great collective exaltation.

Cult of the Individual

Although Durkheim focused much of his attention on the social, he did not dismiss the idea of individualism. Indeed, he believed that in modern society the individual has become sacred, and he called the modern form of collective conscience the cult of the individual. According to Durkheim, humans are constituted by two beings or selves: one is based on the isolated individuality of the body, and the other is based on the social. These two beings may be in a continual state of tension, and they are connected in that individuality develops as society develops. For example, it is only in modern society, characterized by the division of labour, that people even come to understand themselves as distinct individuals. Durkheim argued that individuality has both positive and negative consequences. Egoism, or the selfish pursuit of individual interests, is at odds with moral individualism, the ability to sacrifice self-interest for the rights of all other individual human beings.

Moral Education and Social Reform

Durkheim believed that society is the source of morality; therefore, he also believed that society could be reformed, especially through moral education. According to Durkheim, morality is composed of three elements: discipline, attachment, and autonomy. Discipline constrains egoistic impulses; attachment is the voluntary willingness to be committed to groups; and autonomy is individual responsibility. Education provides children with these three moral tools needed to function in society. Adults can also acquire these moral tools by
joining occupational associations. According to Durkheim, these associations would include members of a particular occupation regardless of class position and could provide a level of integration and regulation, both of which tend to be weakened by the division of labour.

**Criticisms**

Durkheim is often criticized for being a functionalist and a positivist. However, his historical comparative methodology puts him at odds with functionalists and positivists who believe that invariant social laws exist that can explain social phenomenon across all societies. Durkheim does tend to emphasize the objective nature of social facts; thus, he neglects the subjective interpretations that social actors may have of a particular social phenomenon and the agency of individuals in general to control social forces. Furthermore, Durkheim's basic assumption about human nature – that people are driven by their passion for gratification that can never be satisfied – is not empirically substantiated in any of his work. Finally, Durkheim's understanding of the relationship between morality and sociology has been critiqued as being conservative.

**Max Weber's Methodology**

Max Weber (1864-1920) argued against abstract theory, and he favoured an approach to sociological inquiry that generated its theory from rich, systematic, empirical, historical research. This approach required, first of all, an examination of the relationships between, and the respective roles of, history and sociology in inquiry. Weber argued that sociology was to develop concepts for the analysis of concrete phenomena, which would allow sociologists to then make generalizations about historical phenomena. History, on the other hand, would use a lexicon of sociological concepts in order to perform causal analysis of particular historical events, structures, and processes. In scholarly practice, according to Weber, sociology and history are interdependent.

Weber contended that understanding, or verstehen, was the proper way of studying social phenomena. Derived from the interpretive practice known as hermeneutics, the method of verstehen strives to understand the meanings that human beings attribute to their experiences, interactions, and actions. Weber construed verstehen as a methodical, systematic, and rigorous form of inquiry that could be employed in both macro- and micro-sociological analysis.

Weber's formulation of causality stresses the great variety of factors that may precipitate the emergence of complex phenomena such as modern capitalism. Moreover, Weber argued that social scientists, unlike natural scientists, must take into account the meanings that actors attribute to their interactions when considering causality. Weber, furthermore, sought a middle ground between nomothetic (general laws) and idiographic (idiosyncratic actions and events) views in his notion of a probabilistic adequate causality.

Weber's greatest contribution to the conceptual arsenal of sociology is known as the ideal type. The ideal type is basically a theoretical model constructed by means of a detailed empirical study of a phenomenon. An ideal type is an intellectual construct that a sociologist may use to study historical realities by means of their similarities to, and divergences from,
the model. Note that ideal types are not utopias or images of what the world ought to look like.

Weber urged sociologists to reflect on the role of values in both research and the classroom. When teaching, he argued, sociologists ought to teach students the facts, rather than indoctrinating them to a particular political or personal point of view. Weber did argue, however, that the values of one's society often help to decide what a scholar will study. He contended that, while values play this very important role in the research process, they must be kept out of the collection and interpretation of data.

Max Weber's Substantive Sociology

Max Weber's sociology is fundamentally a science that employs both interpretive understanding and causal explanations of social action and interaction. His typology of the four types of social action is central to comprehending his sociology. According to Weber, social action may be classified as means-ends rational action, value-rational action, affectual action, or traditional action. Any student of Weber must keep in mind that these are ideal types.

Weber developed a multidimensional theory of stratification that incorporated class, status, and party. Class is determined by one's economic or market situation (i.e., life chances), and it is not a community but rather a possible basis for communal action. Status is a matter of honor, prestige, and one's style of life. Parties, according to Weber, are organized structures that exist for the purposes of gaining domination in some sphere of social life. Class, status, and party may be related in many ways in a given empirical case, which provides the sociologist with a very sophisticated set of conceptual tools for the analysis of stratification and power.

Weber also made a profound contribution to the study of obedience with his ideal types of legitimate domination or authority. Rational-legal authority rests on rules and law. Traditional authority rests on belief in established practices and traditions — i.e., authority is legitimate because it is exercised the way it has always been exercised. Charismatic authority rests on belief in the extraordinary powers or qualities of a leader. All of these forms of authority must take into account the point of view of those obeying commands. Moreover, each form of authority is associated with a variety of structural forms of organization and administration. Legal authority, for example, is often associated with bureaucracy, while traditional authority is associated with gerontocracy, patriarchalism, patrimonialism, and feudalism. Charismatic authority may be associated with a charismatic form of organization. The dilemma of charismatic authority, however, consists of the difficulty of maintaining charisma when the charismatic leader dies. In other words, charismatic organizations tend to routinize charisma, which invariably gives rise to either traditional or rational-legal authority.

Weber also argued that rationalization is a long-term historical process that has transformed the modern world. His typology of forms of rationality is central to this argument. He argued that there are four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive. He was most concerned with processes of formal and substantive rationalization, especially as
propelled by capitalism and bureaucracy. Weber argued that rationalization has occurred in many spheres, including the economy, law, religion, politics, the city, and art.

Weber's arguments regarding rationalization are exemplified in his studies of religion and capitalism. These sophisticated and voluminous studies inquire into the ways in which religious ideas, the spirit of capitalism, and capitalism as an economic system, are interrelated. In short, according to Weber, Calvinism as a rational, methodical system of religious beliefs and practices was an important factor in the emergence of modern capitalism in the Western world. The economic ethics of other religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, inhibited the emergence of modern capitalism in India and China. Once modern capitalism emerged in the Western world, however, it spread the effects of rationalization worldwide.

While Weber's work has had a profound impact on sociology — as well as other disciplines — it is not without its critics. Some critics question the consistency and applicability of Weber's method of verstehen. Others are puzzled by Weber's methodological individualism as it is applied to macro-sociology. Some critics have rebuked Weber for failing to offer any alternatives to rationalization, capitalism, and bureaucracy. Finally, many critics decry Weber's unflagging pessimism about the future of rationalization and bureaucracy.

References


Questions

1. Analyse Durkheim’s explanation on the significance of social facts.

2. How does Durkheim view division of labour in society.

3. What are the main types of suicide as identified by Durkheim.

4. ‘Max Weber favoured an approach to sociological inquiry that generated its theory from rich, systematic, empirical, historical research.’ - Justify.

5. ‘Max Weber’s sociology is fundamentally a science that employs both interpretive understanding and causal explanations of social action and interaction’ - explain.