
UNIT 18 METHODOLOGY: MARX, DURKHEIM AND WEBER

Methodology: Marx,
Durkheim and Weber

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to understand and compare the methodological perspectives of

- Karl Marx
- Emile Durkheim and
- Max Weber.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

In Blocks 2, 3 and 4 of this course, you have studied in detail some of the enduring sociological contributions of the 'founding fathers' of sociology.

In this Block, we are going to compare the views of Marx, Durkheim and Weber on certain issues. Before we do so, it is important to understand their distinctive methodologies, and this is exactly what we will do in this unit. For this purpose, we have divided the unit into four sections. In the first section (18.2), we will try and understand the meaning of the term ‘methodology’ and the reasons for studying it. The second section (18.3) will take up the methodological perspective of Karl Marx. The third and fourth sections (18.4 and 18.5) will be devoted to an understanding of the methodologies of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, respectively.

18.2 MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF METHODOLOGY

In Blocks 2, 3 and 4 you have studied many things. You are now familiar with Karl Marx’s theory of historical materialism, his understanding of class conflict, dialectics and so on. You also have an understanding of the contributions of Durkheim and Weber.

Yet, no separate unit has been devoted to the study of their methodologies in detail. The reason behind this is that, we hope that your study of the substantive or concrete elements of their work will help you to gain a better appreciation of their frameworks of enquiry, which is what is attempted in this unit. We have used the term ‘methodology’ a number of times so far without really clarifying its meaning. Let us do so now.

18.2.0 What do we mean by ‘Methodology’?

By the term ‘methodology’, we refer to a system of method or procedures with which the study of a problem is approached.

18.2.1 Difference between Methodology and Method

There is an important point to be noted here; ‘methods’ and ‘methodology’ are not one and the same thing. Whilst methods are a part of methodology, methodology is a system which combines or integrates certain methods. Methods are the tools or techniques, which help to implement a methodological approach or perspective.

Let us take an example. In Block 3, you studied how Emile Durkheim understood the problem of suicide. His methodological perspective was the study of social phenomena as social facts and his methods included those of concomitant variations.

Having understood the difference between methodology and method, let us now see why we should study methodology. You might point out that having understood the substantive contributions of the founding fathers, a study of their methodology is not really necessary. This is not the case.

18.2.2 Why Study Methodology?

A study of methodology does more than merely list methods. It gives us an understanding of the overall approach of thinkers to the problems under study. In sociology, the subject matter or problems under study are human beings and human society. Sociologists are not observing atoms or

molecules under a microscope. They are studying human life, human behaviour, human problems. Sociological methodology includes a conception about social reality. It reflects the manner in which thinkers conceptualise the relationship between individuals and society. It gives us an insight into the aims and objectives with which thinkers study society. Since the subject matter under study is so closely and intimately connected to the sociologist, methodology sharply reflects the sociologist's overall concerns and orientations regarding human beings and society. Hence, studying methodology is not only very important but also very interesting.

Let us now go on to examine the methodology of Karl Marx. You have seen in Block 2 that Marx was not a 'sociologist' in the sense that he called his work specifically 'sociological'. He was also an economist, a philosopher and a political activist. Thus, he did not specifically set out to define special methodological rules for sociology as Durkheim and Weber did later. Yet, the mode of enquiry that he introduced has had a profound impact on sociology, both methodologically and substantively.

18.3 THE METHODOLOGY FOR KARL MARX

Karl Marx introduced into the social sciences of his time a new methodology, new concepts and a number of bold new hypotheses.

All of these came to exercise a deep influence on the writing of history, political science and sociology.

Marx elaborated his conception of the nature of society and the means to study it in a more precise and empirical manner than the social theorists before him did. We will examine, firstly, Marx's materialistic conception of history. You have read about this in Block 2 of this course. Here we will briefly review it in the light of his methodology.

18.3.0 Marx's Materialistic Conception of History

The motivating force in history, according to Marx, is the manner in which human beings act upon nature in order to obtain their basic survival needs. The production of material life is the first historical act, in Marx's view. Even after meeting survival or primary needs, human beings remain dissatisfied. This is because new or secondary needs arise as soon as primary ones are fulfilled.

In the effort to satisfy primary and secondary needs, human beings enter into social relationships with each other. As material life becomes more complex, social relationship too undergo a change. Division of labour emerges in society and class formation begins. The existence of classes implies that distinct divisions of human beings have emerged, in other words, society is divided into the "haves" and the "have-nots".

You have studied that Marx places particular stress on the material or economic basis of society. It is the economic "infrastructure" that shapes or moulds/the rest of society. It is the particular mode of production from which emanate the relations of production on which the whole cultural superstructure rests. Law, polity, cultural formations and so on cannot be

separated from the economic basis in which they are embedded. We can thus say that Marx's approach to society is holistic. This is a very important methodological contribution. Marx stresses on the study of human societies as wholes or systems in which social groups, institutions, beliefs and doctrines are interrelated. They cannot be studied in isolation, rather they should be studied in their interrelations.

However, in the ultimate analysis, it is the economic system, which proves decisive in shaping the specific features of the superstructure of society. Marx applies his materialistic conception of history by studying the history of human society in terms of distinct stages, each marked by a distinct mode of production. From the mode of production flow the specific kinds of relationships and class antagonisms distinct in every phase of history.

In Block 2 of this course you have studied in detail Marx's theory of "historical materialism" and the stages of history identified by him. Marx can be described as a relativising historicist. By this we mean that he roots all systems of social relationships and all systems of ideas within a specific historical context. He holds that each stage of history is marked by class struggles, but the nature of the struggle and the participants in the struggle are qualitatively different in every epoch. The slaves in the ancient stage are very different from the feudal serfs or the capitalist industrial workers.

Briefly, Marx assigns to the economic realm the crucial role of shaping the nature of other sub-systems in society. He studies society in a holistic fashion, stressing on the inter-relatedness of its components. He also takes note of the specificities of the various stages of history. Although Marx insists that the history of human society is the history of class struggle, he accounts for the distinctive features of the classes down the ages.

Let us now move on to another significant methodological contribution of Marx, namely, his conception of social conflict and social change.

18.3.1 Social Conflict and Social Change

Early sociology, as you have studied in Block 1 of this course, was profoundly influenced by the idea of evolution. The work of Auguste Comte and more importantly, Herbert Spencer reflected the doctrine of evolutionary change. We can say that the early sociologists stressed on change through peaceful growth. For them, social order and harmony was normal and disorder and conflict was pathological.

It is against this background that you will be able to appreciate better how important Marx's contributions are. According to Marx, societies are inherently mutable or changeable systems. Changes are produced mainly by internal contradictions and conflicts. Each stage in human history is marked by certain contradictions and tensions. These become intensified over a period of time to such an extent that the existing system has to break down, giving way to a new system. In other words, each historical stage contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The new system emerges from the womb of the old. Thus, Marx understands conflict not as something pathological and harmful, but as a creative force. It is the engine of progress.

His conception of conflict as the major harbinger of change reflects in the unique way in which he deals with both the past and the present, and also in his anticipation of the future. This brings us to one of the problem areas in Marxist social theory, namely, the conflict between objective science and political commitment. Let us briefly consider this aspect of Marx's work.

Activity 1

Carefully read the daily newspapers. Identify some major national or inter national conflicts. Try to interpret them using Marx's methodology. Write a note of about one page and compare it if possible with other students at your Study Centre.

18.3.2 Marx's Notion of 'Praxis'

Ever since the birth of sociology right down to the present time, sociologists have argued over the separation between sociological theory and political ideology. Marx's work represents that stream of social thought where theory and political activism unite. Marx very clearly voices his opinions of capitalist society in his work. He sees it as an inhuman system of exploitation and anticipates its breakdown under the weight of its own contradictions. He awaits the birth of a classless, communist society, which will be free of contradictions. Marx advocates "praxis", namely, using theory for practical political action. Thus, Marx's methodology aims not just at understanding society, but also anticipating and assisting in changing it. You can read more about the concept of 'praxis' in Box 18.1.

Box 18.1

Praxis: The word 'praxis' is of Greek origin and refers to action or activity of all kinds. The term passed into Latin and through it to the modern European languages. The Greek Philosopher Aristotle gave the term a more precise meaning and used it to denote specifically human activity. He contrasted it with theory or 'theoretica'. In medieval European philosophy, the term was used to denote applications of theory, e.g. theoretical geometry ('theoretica') and practical or applied geometry (praxis). The medieval European scholar Francis Bacon insisted that true knowledge is that which bears fruit in praxis, defining it as the application of human powers and actions for the attainment of good and useful things. Immanuel Kant distinguished between "pure" and "practical" reason in his work *Critique of Pure Reason*. Philosophy is thus divided into theoretical and practical. The theoretical part tells us 'what there is' and the practical one tells us 'what there should be'. Kant insisted on the primacy of practical philosophy. Hegel too accepted the distinction between the two but also thought that the two united in a third, higher moment. Hegel's philosophical system is divided into three parts, namely, logic philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit. In each of these parts, a distinction between theoretical and practical aspects arises and is transcended in a higher synthesis. In Hegel's system, praxis became one of the moments of 'absolute truth'. In Marx's, the concept of praxis becomes central. Philosophy is to be transcended

into revolutionary action, which will transform the world. Marx speaks of praxis as the goal of true philosophy and revolution as true praxis. Marx sees 'praxis' basically as free, conscious activity through which alienation is eliminated. Thus praxis is the transformation of alienative labour into non-alienative, creative 'self-activity'.

Let us now go on to study the methodology of Durkheim. Here, we move on to a distinctly sociological methodology. Durkheim, as you already know, was actively involved in developing the emerging concerns of the sociology of his times. According to Randall Collins (1985: 123), Durkheim made sociology a distinctive science with its own lawful generalisations.

Check Your Progress 1

Answer the following in three sentences each.

- i) Distinguish between 'methods' and 'methodology'.
- ii) Why is Marx's approach to society said to be 'holistic'?
- iii) Marx is a 'relativising historicist'. What does this statement mean?
- iv) Complete the following sentences.
 - a) According to Marx, changes in society are mainly produced by
 - b) By 'praxis' Marx refers to
 - c) Durkheim made a clear distinction between and sociological explanations.
 - d) According to Durkheim, human desires can be checked by

18.4 THE METHODOLOGY OF EMILE DURKHEIM

Emile Durkheim is one of the key figures in the development of a distinctly sociological orientation. Durkheim's work is marked by an emphasis on the social aspect of phenomena. To Durkheim goes the credit of making a clear separation between psychological or individualistic explanations and sociological explanations. To understand this point further, we will first describe how Durkheim views the interrelationship between the individual and society. We will then consider how Durkheim identifies social facts as the subject matter of sociology and finally, we will describe in brief his "functional analysis" of society.

18.4.0 Individual and Society

To Durkheim, human beings are creatures with unlimited desires. Unlike other animals they are not satisfied when biological needs have been fulfilled. Human desires can only be held in check by external or societal control, according to Durkheim. Society constitutes a regulative force, which sets certain limits to individual passions.

When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individuals is no longer effective. Individuals are left to their own devices. Durkheim terms this state of affairs as “anomie” or normlessness. It is a condition wherein individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms, thus leaving individuals without moral guidelines for pursuing their goals.

According to Lewis Coser (1971: 133), the major concern in Durkheim’s sociology is the problem of social order versus disorder. Durkheim is concerned with explaining the forces that contribute to social regulation and de-regulation. He addresses himself to the tensions between individual desires and social cohesion. He attempts to establish a balance between individual and societal claims.

Focus on analysing this tension expresses itself all throughout Durkheim’s work. For instance, in *Division of Labour* Durkheim (1893) identifies two types of societies, those based on mechanical solidarity and those based on organic solidarity. The former society is marked by the total grip of the ‘collective conscience’ on the individual. The latter type is marked by the flowering of individualism. Durkheim speaks favourably of organic solidarity because he sees it as a state where individual concerns can in fact help build stronger societal bonds. Thus, Durkheim’s understanding of the relationship between individual and society is a complex one. He does not take an extreme stance by stating that the individual is unimportant, and emphasises the role of individual creativity. He does not advocate pure, unchecked individualism either, but recognises the need for societal regulation.

For Durkheim, society is ‘sui-generis’. It is self-generating. It is more than just the sum of individuals that constitute it. It existed before the individual and will continue to exist long after individuals. Its members are born and die, but society lives on. It thus exists independently of the individuals that constitute it. However, individuals cannot exist without or apart from society. Having understood the interrelationship between individual and society as described by Durkheim, let us go on to see what, according to him, the task of the sociologist is. In other words, what is the subject matter of sociology?

18.4.1 Subject Matter of Sociology — The Social Fact

In his major works ‘*The Division of Labour in Society*’, ‘*Suicide*’ and ‘*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*’, Emile Durkheim explains the phenomena in question by sociological explanations. He rejects individualistic or psychological explanations. For instance, in tracing the causes for suicide, Durkheim dismisses explanations like madness or alcoholism (psychological explanations) but looks towards society for explanation. For Durkheim, suicide has a social aspect and reflects poor social integration. For Durkheim sociology is the study of essentially social facts and the explanation of these facts in a sociological manner. Durkheim systematically discusses this in ‘*The Rules of Sociological Method*’ (1895). He tries to demonstrate that there may and must be a sociology, which is an objective science, based on the model of other sciences. The subject matter of this science must be specific and distinct from that of the other

sciences and must be such that it can be observed and explained just like facts are observed and explained in other sciences. To make this objective science of social facts possible, Durkheim gives the following two guidelines, namely, (1) social facts must be regarded as things, and (2) a social fact exercises a constraint on individuals.

Let us examine the first of these points. What does Durkheim mean when he asks us to regard social facts as “things”? He means that we must shed our preconceptions and prejudices and observe social facts from outside. We must discover and observe them as we discover physical facts. For instance, you want to study ‘democracy’ in India. If you follow Durkheim’s suggestion, you will shed your preconceived or vague ideas, e.g., “democracy is a failure in India” or “democracy is people’s rule”, and so on.

You will instead observe it objectively and scientifically. How can a social fact be observed and recognised? This brings us to the second point, namely, that a social fact forces itself upon or exercises a constraint upon the individual. To take the example of democracy in India, the social fact, namely, democracy, can be recognised during elections. Politicians ask citizens for their votes and support. Thus democracy forces itself upon or constrains citizens to make certain choices or act in a certain manner. Let us take another example of a social fact, which exercises constraints on individual behaviour. You are part of a crowd in a cricket match. When Sachin Tendulkar hits a six the whole crowd goes into frenzy. You may not be a Tendulkar fan, but since you are in that crowd, you too will clap and cheer. You are constrained or pressurised into behaving in a certain manner. These two propositions, to regard social facts as things and to recognise social facts by the constraints they exercise, are according to Raymond Aron, (1970: 72) the foundations of Durkheim’s methodology.

Durkheim’s prescription to study social facts externally and objectively shows the impact of natural sciences in shaping sociology. Remember that sociology was in its infancy at that time, struggling to carve out a niche for itself in the academic world. The contributions of Durkheim to the methodology of the subject must be seen in this light. Let us now briefly look at Durkheim’s ‘functional’ analysis of social institutions and phenomena.

18.4.2 Durkheim’s Functional Analysis of Society

Among Durkheim’s most important methodological contributions is his functional analysis or explanation. The idea of studying social phenomena in terms of their function or role in maintaining the life of society has its origins in biology. Each part of a living organism has a particular function in maintaining the life and health of the organism. For instance, if we consider the various organisms of the human body in a functionalist manner, we will see that each part contributes to maintaining the whole. The heart pumps blood, the lungs purify air, the stomach grinds and breaks down food, the brain directs and coordinates the other organs. All these functions performed by the various organs help to keep us alive and healthy.

If society is studied with a functionalist perspective, we will view the various systems and institutions of society in terms of their contributions in keeping

society intact, or maintaining social order. Durkheim clearly establishes the procedure of the functional approach in studying social phenomena. According to him, “the determination of function is... necessary for the complete explanation of the phenomena... To explain a social fact it is not enough to show the cause on which it depends; we must also... show its function in the establishment of social order.” (*Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 97.)

In other words, for Durkheim, sociological understanding of phenomena cannot be complete until the role or function of these phenomena in maintaining social order is understood. The concept of function plays a key part in all of Durkheim’s work. In *Division of Labour* he tries to see how the process of occupational specialisation functions to maintain social order and cohesion. (You will study this point in greater detail in Unit 20 of this Block.) In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* he demonstrates the function of religious rules and beliefs in strengthening social bonds, as you will see in Unit 19. The thread that runs right through Durkheim’s work is the need to demonstrate social order.

Briefly, Emile Durkheim attempts to demarcate a subject matter for sociology that will enable the sociologist to gain an objective and unbiased view of social phenomena. The task of the sociologist, according to Durkheim, is to understand social facts in a sociological manner. By doing so, he/she can give explanations regarding the function of social phenomena in helping to maintain social order.

If you have read the above pages on the methodology of Marx and Durkheim carefully, one major point of difference will have become clear to you. Marx’s emphasis is on conflict whilst Durkheim’s is on order. Let us now briefly compare the perspectives of these thinkers. But before that, complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

Identify any two social institutions in your society, e.g., marriage, family, caste, clan, etc. Try and understand them with the help of functional analysis. Write a note of about two pages and compare it if possible with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

18.4.3 Social Conflict Versus Social Order

Whilst Marx stressed the role of conflict and struggle in maintaining the vitality of society, Durkheim stresses harmony and social order. Durkheim regards conflict as pathological or abnormal; Marx regards it as the vehicle of social change. Durkheim studies social facts in terms of their contribution to social order and Marx constantly explores the contradictions and tensions within a society, which will bring in change.

Notice, though, that both thinkers treat society as an entity or reality in itself. Marx speaks of various subsystems constituting an interrelated whole and is concerned with the historical movement of the total society from one stage to another. Durkheim too speaks of society as a reality, which is ‘sui-generis’. Both thinkers are more concerned with social wholes rather

than individual behaviour and feeling which, according to them, emanate from particular societal conditions. Marx and Durkheim can thus be described as social realists.

This point becomes particularly relevant when we compare their methodologies with that of Max Weber. Weber's brand of sociology reflects a shift in emphasis. Weber's starting-point is social action. He is concerned with the behaviour of the individual which, he holds, is shaped by the individual's attitudes, values and beliefs. Weber is concerned with interpreting the meanings ascribed by actors to the world around them. Let us now first complete Check Your Progress 2 and then study Max Weber's methodology in some detail.

Check Your Progress 2

Answer the following questions in 2 to 3 sentences each.

- i) State whether the following statements are True' (T) or 'False' (F).
 - a) Durkheim held that the individual is unimportant because society is all -powerful.
 - b) In organic solidarity, individuals can exist without society.
- ii) How can a 'social fact' be recognised? Give an example.

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- iii) Give two examples of Durkheim's functional analysis.

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18.5 THE METHODOLOGY OF MAX WEBER

Max Weber conceives sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. He focuses on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions and interactions within their specific social-historical contexts.

Weber's focus on the meanings ascribed by actors to their actions reflects his distinctive methodology. Weber challenges the notion that social sciences can be modelled on the lines of natural science. He thus charts out a special subject matter and special methods of inquiry for social sciences.

Weber rejects the positivist notion that the aims and methods of natural sciences and social or cultural sciences are the same. He takes the stand that the human being, in contrast to things or natural objects, has certain underlying motivations, which the sociologist must try to understand. He suggests a method that will help the sociologist achieve this purpose. Let us see what it is.

18.5.0 'Verstehen' or Interpretative Understanding

Weber points out that a natural scientist's understanding of natural phenomena is from the outside. Let us take an example. When a chemist studies the properties of a particular substance, he does so from the outside. When a sociologist tries to understand human society and culture, he approaches it as an insider, or a participant. Being human, the social scientist has access to the motives and feelings of his/her subject matter. Social scientists can understand human action by probing the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Sociological understanding is thus qualitatively different from that of other sciences. Sociology, in Weber's opinion, must use the method of interpretative understanding or "verstehen" (which means 'to understand' in German). The method of verstehen implies that the sociologist should visualise the motivations of the actor by trying to interpret his feelings, his understanding of the situation. But is verstehen sufficient for sociological explanation? According to Weber, it is only the first step. The next step of analysis is causal explanation or searching for the causes or reasons behind the occurrence of any social phenomena. In order to facilitate sociological analysis, Weber develops an important methodological tool, which you have already studied in detail in Block 4 of this course. This is the "ideal type".

18.5.1 The Ideal Type

The ideal type provides a basic method for comparative study. It refers to creating a kind of model which includes the most prominent characteristics of the phenomena to be studied. In a way, it is an exaggerated picture of a particular reality. For instance, if you want to construct an ideal type of a villain in an Indian film, you may develop an image of a man with small, wicked eyes, a moustache, a deep voice and a sinister laugh, wearing a flashy suit, carrying a gun and surrounded by "gondas"! Of course, not all villains in Indian movies are just like this. But you have abstracted the most commonly found characteristics and created an analytical construct (see figure 18.1: Ideal type of a film villain). This ideal type can be used as a measuring rod with which the sociologist can compare existing reality.



Figure 18.1 Ideal type of a film villain

Ideal types help to construct hypotheses. Using ideal types, the sociologist can measure real development and clarify important aspects of reality. In Block 4, you have seen how Weber used the ideal types of “the Protestant ethic” and “the spirit of capitalism”, showing the linkages between them. His study of the sociology of religion with which you are by now familiar, reflects the ‘historicity’ which is an important aspect of Weber’s approach. At this point it will be interesting for you to complete Activity 3.

Activity 3

Construct ideal types of (a) the Indian joint family and/or (b) life in an urban slum. Try and compare the existing reality with your ideal types. How representative or accurate are your ideal types? Note down your findings.

18.5.2 Causality and Historical Comparison

What we have studied so far about Weber’s methodology is that he advocates the study of social action. To do so, an interpretative understanding of the motives and values of actors is recommended by him. The use of ‘ideal types’ will help the sociologist to gain insights into actual, concrete events. Weber is also interested in providing causal explanations. But human society being so complex single or absolute causes to explain phenomena cannot be given, according to Weber. He thus speaks of a plurality of causes. Certain causes, however, can be identified as being more important than others. For instance, in his understanding of capitalism, Weber speaks of the importance of religious ethics. But he certainly does not say that religious values are the only causes behind the growth of modern capitalism. To show the importance of religious values in influencing the development of capitalism, Weber uses the method of historical comparison. You have seen in Unit 16, Block 4 of this course how he compared the growth of capitalism in the west to the absence of its growth in ancient China and India. The reason for this difference, he concluded, was the presence or absence of an appropriate ethic or value-system. Thus, Weber’s methodology does include a search for causal explanations but not monocausal explanations. Since Weber was so concerned with the importance of values and beliefs in social action, it will be interesting to ask what his stand concerning values in social science was. Did Weber, like Marx combine theory and political activism? Did he, like Durkheim speak of strict objectivity? Why not read the next sub-section for an answer?

18.5.3 Values in Social Science

Science is often described as an ‘objective’ search for truth. It is supposed to be value-free, unbiased, impartial. You have seen how Durkheim advocates objective understanding of social facts and how he recommends that the sociologist free himself/herself from prejudice and pre-conceived notions. Is an ‘objective’, ‘value-free’ science, natural or social, really possible? According Weber, values play an important role in choosing a particular topic of study. Why have you chosen sociology as an elective course? Certain values have guided you. You might have thought it

interesting, or easy, or may be you did not like the other elective courses. Similarly, if a scientist decides to study, say, the behaviour of an atom or the life and customs of rural Indians, he/she has been guided by certain value orientations.

But Weber makes a clear distinction between value-orientations and value judgments. The researcher or scientist may be guided to undertake a particular study because of certain value-orientations, but, according to Weber, he/she must not pass moral judgments about it. The researcher must observe ethical neutrality. His/her job is to study phenomena, not pass judgments about whether they are 'good' or 'evil'. These, in brief are the major methodological contributions of Weber.

You have by now gained an understanding of the distinctive methodological orientations of each of the three founding fathers of sociology. It is time now, to ask an important question, namely, how did they define the role and tasks of the social scientist? The answer to this question will help you to summarise the aims and objectives, which they had in mind when they undertook their respective studies of social phenomena.

18.5.4 The Role of the Social Scientist

You have already studied how Emile Durkheim conceptualises sociology as the study of social facts. The sociologist, having rid himself/herself of preconceived notions and prejudices, can objectively understand the characteristics of social facts and study the role of social institutions in helping to maintain social order.

Weber assigns to the sociologist the task of interpretative understanding of the motives of human actors. The humanness of the sociologist can prove an asset in understanding society and culture because the sociologist can examine phenomena from the inside. He/she can attempt causal explanations by using ideal types and historical comparison. But ethical neutrality must be maintained. In Marx, we find that the role of the social scientist is linked to the role of the political activist. By understanding the tensions and conflicts that mark society, the social scientist can anticipate and help to pave the way for an ideal society, free of contradictions and exploitation.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Complete the following, statements.
 - a) According to Weber, social scientists can understand human action by probing assigned by actors to their behaviour.
 - b) can be used as a measuring rod to compare existing reality.
 - c) Weber distinguishes between value-orientations and
- ii) State whether the following statements are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F)
 - a) Weber maintained that a social scientist must give monocausal explanations for social phenomena.

- b) Since social science cannot be value-free, sociologists cannot maintain ethical neutrality.

18.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to understand what is meant by ‘methodology’ and why it is important to study it. We have then briefly described the methodological perspectives of each of the three founding fathers, drawing comparisons on the way.

We studied how Marx conceptualised the history of society using a materialistic methodology. Studying social institutions in terms of their relatedness, Marx stressed the inherently mutable or changeable nature of society. In his view, social conflict is the engine of change and it is the role of the politically committed social scientist to study and anticipate the birth of the classless society of the future, namely, the communist society.

Emile Durkheim was concerned with establishing sociology as a legitimate science. He introduced a certain rigour in sociological method. He spoke of ‘social facts’ as the proper subject-matter of sociological enquiry and made a clear distinction between psychological and sociological explanations. It was Durkheim who brought into vogue functional analysis, which is in use even today.

Max Weber’s methodology marked a shift in sociological emphasis. Whilst Durkheim and Marx practised social realism, Weber focused on interpretative understanding of the motives of human actors. He undertook comparative historical studies and provided multi-layered or multi-casual analyses of social phenomena.

The aims and objectives with which these thinkers approached the study of society differed. Whilst Durkheim and Weber were keen on maintaining a certain scientific aloofness, Marx believed in the use of theory to guide political action.

18.7 KEYWORDS

Anomie	A term used by Durkheim to denote a situation where previously existing norms have lost their validity. The individual no longer feels integrated into society and is left to his/her own devices.
Collective conscience	A term used by Durkheim to denote the totality of beliefs, sentiments and values held in common by the members of a society.
Ethical Neutrality	Not passing value-judgments, i.e. not commenting on whether something is “good” or “bad”.
Hypothesis	A statement of cause and effect which has to be scientifically proved. Hypotheses are important in scientific research and when proved, they

become laws. If they cannot be proved, they are discarded or improved upon. An example of a sociological hypothesis could be “the children of divorced parents are likely to become juvenile delinquents”. Sociologists must verify this hypothesis before it becomes a law.

Ideology A body of ideas usually political and/or economic with which to guide policy.

Mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity Durkheim differentiated between solidarity or social bonds based on similarity (mechanical solidarity) on the one hand and differences or heterogeneity (organic solidarity) on the other. The former can be observed in simple traditional societies and the latter in more complex, modern societies.

Pathological Diseased, harmful.

Positivist Based on practical experience. The term ‘positivism’ is used to denote the scientific model on which early sociology tried to develop itself.

18.8 FURTHER READING

Aron, Raymond 1970. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Volumes 1 and 2, Penguin: London. (See the sections on Marx, Durkheim and Weber)

Coser, Lewis 1971. *Masters of Sociological Thought - Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York. (See the sections on Marx, Durkheim and Weber.)

18.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) By ‘methodology’ we mean a system of methods or procedures with which the study of a problem is approached. ‘Methods’ refer to the specific techniques, which comprise methodology. Thus, methodology is a system and methods are parts or tools of that system.
- ii) Marx considered societies as social wholes. The various institutions and sub-systems of society were studied by him in terms of their interrelationships, not in isolation. Hence his approach is said to be ‘holistic’.
- iii) Marx considered the various stages of history to be distinctive and with their own specificities. For instance, although he considered class conflict to be a common feature of all the stages, he maintained that

its nature and participants differed in each stage. Hence he is described as 'relativising historicist'.

- iv) a) internal contradictions and conflicts
- b) tying together theory and political action
- c) psychological
- d) societal control.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) a) F b) F
- ii) A 'social fact' can be recognised because it exerts a constraint on individuals. It forces or pressurises individuals to behave in a certain manner. For example, if one is part of a crowd at a cricket match and the crowd claps and cheers, one also gets carried away and behaves like the others in the crowd.
- iii) In '*Division of Labour*' Durkheim explains the growth of occupational specialisation in terms of its contribution in bringing about social cohesion. In '*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*', Durkheim explains the role of religion in strengthening social bonds. This illustrates his functional analysis.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) a) subjective meanings
- b) ideal type
- c) value-judgments
- ii) a) F b) F