Unit 4
Theoretical Analysis

Contents

Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 4 you will be able to learn and discuss the following themes.

❖   Theoretical analysis of data collected in terms of evolutionary and functionalist premises and their critiques

❖   In the nineteen eighties and nineties abandoning of the empirical approach in favour of subjectivity and reflexivity

❖   Emergence of post-modernism and yet, in most regions including India, adherence to older methodology of fact-finding.

4.1 Introduction

In Unit 3 we discussed that theories differ according to the basic or major premises on which they are based. The premises are the given conditions or universal truths that we take for granted when we formulate a research problem or look for some explanations of a social phenomenon. Continuing with our general discussion of the approaches to understanding social reality, in Unit 4 we are going to wind up our narrative by talking about the growth of theoretical analysis in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular.

We will begin the story with the evolutionary theory and move on to functional and structure-functional approaches. After a short critique of evolutionary and functional theories, we will discuss the phase of post-modernism with regard to the 'crisis of representation' in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. During the nervous eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, American and continental social sciences included intensive reflection on the link between authorship and authority and focused on subjectivity and reflexivity while abandoning the empirical approach.

Almost in a racing style, the narrative in Unit 4 gives you an opportunity to become fleetingly familiar with the names of post-modern scholars

and their ideas. At the end, we will briefly note the current status of methodological engagements of sociology in India.

4.2 Premises of Evolutionary and Functional Theories

In the nineteenth century, with the acceptance of the fact that the human is a unified species, the problem of variation of human social institutions and cultures was explained by converting a spatial difference into a temporal one. In other words, different societies were different because they were seen to be in different stages in the ladder of evolution. This was the evolutionary theory based upon the basic assumption of progress and a stage-by-stage evolution of human society, where society was seen as one unified reality of human existence. Culture was spelt with a capital C and was common to all humanity and not cultures that vary across time and space. From this point of view all societies are the same, the difference that we observe is only a chance factor of some societies being arrested in development and others more progressive. Some societies are past of the others and some are the future of all. Because of this in-built idea of progress, the term 'primitive society' came into being. Those termed primitive were literally considered to be the past of those termed modern. The study of other cultures was thus the study of looking into one's past.

The evolutionary theory was built upon the premise that we can explain the occurrence of some social phenomenon by reference to the past of human societies. The assumption was that this past can be discovered in societies physically in the present but culturally arrested at some previous time period; the term 'our primitive contemporaries' was used for the purpose of describing culturally arrested types.

This trend was followed by the functional theory that was derived from the eighteenth century positivism and organic analogy[©]. The basic premises of this theory were not in the transformation and understanding of human society and culture as unified but were rooted in relativism and interdependence. It was believed that cultures are multiple and each is unique unto itself. The questions that were asked were not about origin and progress but about the contribution and function of each trait to the functioning of the whole. The whole here was a living society and culture to be studied only in the present with no allusion to the past or future.

In the functional approach, to understand social reality we have a static theory. A static explanation is one where a social variable is explained only in terms of variables belonging to the same time period. This kind of theory is not based on a premise that the phenomenon in question is actually ahistorical but on the assumption that a sufficient understanding of it is possible by recourse to data that are situational. The type of questions that the functional theory would address would be different

from those addressed by evolutionists, who professed a theory of human society progressing from stage A to stage B in a scale of evolution. Usually functionalists have explained what function is being performed by a particular trait in a particular culture at a particular period of time. In the evolutionary theory, on the other hand, at least some of the variables used in the explanation belonged to a time period prior to the time than the variables to be explained. In this sense the evolutionary theory was used to explain origins and development, or transformations and social change.

From Durkheim to Talcott Parsons, functionalism with its roots in early French philosophers like Comte had a long grip over sociological theory. It served the needs of the hour and was compatible with the organic analogy that was often drawn for society and culture by social philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists.

4.3 Critique of Evolutionary and Functional Theories

Quite often as an adjunct of historical conditions, the accepted premises of a discipline have been challenged time and again with changes in the philosophies of the times. For instance, the concept of the 'primitive' was challenged and replaced by the concept of 'cultural relativism'. Admirable as the concept of cultural relativism was in according validity and status to all cultures, many scholars attacked the implicit assumption, underlying this concept, that one should maintain *the status quo* in the name of relativism. If every culture is demonstrated to be a functioning whole then the implication is that all cultures should be left alone. Many scholars criticised this point of view on the grounds that such a policy would perpetuate inequalities and differential power equations that exist in the world. Every group of people has a right to change and improve its living conditions and harbour aspirations for a better life. This is especially true in situations of traditional inequalities and marginalisation. For example would one make a case to preserve the institution of untouchability on the ground that it leads to a stable and functioning system? The entire concept of functionality and harmony were questioned on methodological grounds of teleology (for the meaning of this term see Box 4.1) and on ethical ground of social injustice. You can also clearly make out that functionality does not guarantee justice. For example, even slavery may have been a functional system in that it was productive and it worked, but to call it just would be stretching things too far.

> **Box 4.1 Teleology**
> Teleology refers to justifying the existence of a phenomenon by the function it performs. Teleology implies that one is trying to explain the effect as the cause of a phenomenon. This is precisely what functionalists did by way of offering explanations of social phenomena.

It became quite obvious that to assume a static view of society, like the functional theorists did, had far-reaching implications in terms of social policy. The debate ensued as to what approach the administration should take with respect to the so-called marginal people under its jurisdiction. Many were opposed to the 'preservation' approach and many others to the 'assimilation' approach. The question was also raised as to whether the concept of cultural relativism was a descriptive hypothesis or a value theory. As a hypothesis it states that no value judgments are objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures but this does not rule out the possibility that some values may be common to all cultures. In this sense, it makes social scientists to state facts and not to make value judgments about cultures. Most sociologists and anthropologists are careful in stating their data in terms of facts, 'what is' and not in terms of 'what ought to be'. This practice often raises the moral question whether a scholar remains just a scholar when she/he comes across practices that are heinous, like female infanticide? Some may advocate a separation of roles as scientist and as scholar and others may incorporate the role of activism within that of the scientist. Such questions continue to always haunt the scholar in the field.

As human beings study human societies, the gap between theory and practice is quite often fraught with tension. In the late twentieth century critical theory largely replaced value neutral theories as more and more scholars engaged in issues like human rights and social justice. This is not to say that such were not also the concerns of earlier social thinkers. For example, the social bases of theory in the thoughts of Marx and others included concerns of social justice (you will read more on this in Unit 6).

Theory in the social sciences has continuously reflected changing social conditions. In the early twentieth century the concept of change became a major theoretical and ethical issue as it was realised that change was an essential dimension of our lives. The two World Wars, the independence of the colonies, rapid industrialisation and capitalist expansion, all had immense effects on sociological theory. Not only change but also conflict became a central concept in the social sciences and it became increasingly debated as to what was a more natural human condition, harmony or conflict? Critics like David Lockwood (1992) complained that it gave a fictionalised view of the world.

Another kind of criticism emerging was about the nature of science and reality itself. It claimed that any claim to scientific objectivity is itself a constructed phenomenon and such constructs invariably serve the power interests of some. The works of Foucault (1926-1984) and Gramsci (1891-1937) were much influential in these lines. Both Foucault and Gramsci elaborated on themes of one's own domination by more powerful others.

4.4 Turning away from Functionalism

It was Karl Marx (1818-1883) whose influence led to the initial turn away

from the functional theory. His basic assumptions regarding the nature of society itself as a product of historical materialism was in contradiction to the view of society as a harmonic system that could be subjected to static analysis. Methodologically history and a dynamic perspective were now seen as essential to a sociological analysis. The works of Marx (1844, 1857-8, 1859, 1861-79) were the prime stimulant to the development of a critical approach to social reality.

Karl Marx
(1818-1883)

Those forming social science theory in the mid-twentieth century drew inspiration from the ideas of George Simmel (1858-1918) and Max Weber (1864-1920). You will find that Weber also

provided a counter to the essential positivism of the Marxian theory that was to have been a true scientific study of history.

The contribution of Marx was to take away the mechanistic character attributed to the actions of human beings, showing them to be active agents in shaping their destinies but only as products of their own histories. He firmly emphasised the human existence in the material world as contributory to social action rather than mere ideas shaping history.

Max Weber
(1864-1920)

Marx's assumptions regarding society were criticised on the basis of their overt generalisations regarding the importance of economic organisations and property relations in shaping society and the bipolarisation of social conflict. It was also recognised that property is not the only basis of power

in society. For example, take the thesis of Dumont who held that in the context of the caste system in India the sacred power of the priest was considered superior to the temporal power of the king. Moreover it was also debatable whether conflict always causes social change. You can give the example of Gluckman (1965), who had found that conflict could also function as the basis of the maintenance of the social order. Notwithstanding these arguments against Marx's ideas,

Max Gluckman
(1911-1975)

his key propositions regarding the nature of society had a lasting influence on social thought (see also Unit 7).

You can say that sociology as a discipline remained until the ninety-sixties largely in the realm of functionalism and developed two types of theories, namely grand theories and middle range theories. Grand theories make sweeping generalisations about the nature of society and history and middle-range theories are more inductive in nature and are built up

around a limited set of observed facts. Marx's theory was an example of the first kind, one that made predictions about the state of the world. Another grand theory that dominated sociological thinking in the mid-twentieth century was functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). His work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) is one of the most influential theoretical works of the twentieth century (see Box 4.2 and 4.3).

Box 4.2 Talcott Parsons' Main Argument

Talcott Parsons (1937) held that theory in sociology must be built up around a

limited number of important concepts that are adequate to grasp the objective and external social reality. These concepts are analytical constructs abstracted from empirical reality. Thus Parsons tried to develop a naturalistic/ positivistic conceptual schema. Underlying Parsons' method of building theoretical analysis was the assumption that the social reality does have systematic regularities that can be analytically grasped. At the same time Parsons advocated the existence of the complex symbolic functioning of the human mind.
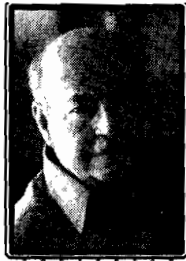
Talcot Parsons.
(1902-1979)

Parsons' action theory (see Box 4.3 and also Block 7 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A Programme) is integrative in nature and his concepts of functional prerequisites are independent of time or place. They are general and ahistorical, that is, they are found in all societies at any point of time.

Box 4.3 Talcott Parsons' Theory of Action

At the core of his voluntaristic theory of action is the thinking and individual actor, who is goal seeking. This goal seeking behavior is faced with alternative means and situated in varying life conditions that act as constraints on the goal seeking behavior. The actors are also governed by values, norms and ideas that influence choice of goals as well as the appropriate means to achieve them. Finally action involves actors making subjective decisions to choose the means to achieve the goals under the given conditions of constraint. Applications of this theory were many like in health seeking behavior.

Critiquing Parsons' approach, Giddens (1979: 112) has commented, "In both Althusserian Marxism and Parsonian sociology the reproduction of society occurs 'behind the backs' of the agents whose conduct constitutes that society. The involvement of actors' own purposive conduct with the rationalisation of action is lacking in each case: in Parson's sociology as a result of the value-consensus-norm-internalised need-disposition theorem, and in Althusser's writings as a consequence of his deterministic account of agency; hence the teleology of the system either governs (in the first) or supplants (in the second) that of actors themselves".

The functional theories (see Blocks 6 and 7 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A Programme) of Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Malinowski (1944) were

criticised as not really reflecting social reality. Increasingly by the nineteen sixties a criticism of functional approach was emerging that considered the homeostatic (the state of remaining at a constant level) system forming the basis of the functional theory as utopian. Some criticisms like those of Merton and Firth and Leach came out from within the limits of functionality. These critical views reinterpreted the concepts to introduce more flexibility. For example, Merton (1968) introduced the concepts of functional alternative, and functional substitutability. Similarly, Raymond Firth (1901-2002) gave the concept of social organisation and

**Raymond Firth
(1901-2002)**

Edmund Leach(1910-1989) discussed the concept of dynamic equilibrium (see Leach 1961). The emphasis in all these was on a middle range of generalisation. The next phase in theory was the return to evolution or to a dynamic conceptualisation of society. The static was seen as totally inadequate to explain social reality that was visibly transforming. This view became entrenched in the era of rapid global change.

In the social sciences there was a revival of evolution in the form of neo-evolutionary theories and in sociology the work of Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) emphasised the role of the environment in the study of social systems. In all such theories we see an attempt to get away from too much generalisation to come back to

**Edmund Leach
(1910-1989)**

more concrete and material conditions but at the same time not to forget the symbolic dimensions of human society. Both cultural ecology and Luhmann's (1998) general system's approach included environment as a variable for understanding social reality. Adaptation to environment became a key concept and mal-adaptation was introduced into analysis.
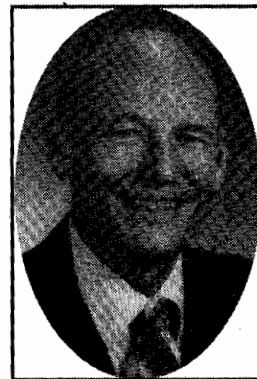
Another major transformation in theoretical analysis was in thinking that the social sciences could never be truly positivistic. One of the prominent followers of this mode of reasoning was Max Weber (see also Unit 7). In spite of his efforts to rise above positivism, Weber included generalisations in his analysis that indicate his belief in the regularities of social life. Such regularities are clearly present in his discussions of leadership and the evolution of leadership from the traditional to the rational-legal. One major

**Niklas Luhmann
(1927-1998)**

contribution of Weber was his critical insights into the process of evolution towards modern society. His view of evolution was not a utopian one of unilateral progress. He did not see the destruction of tradition as uniformly

beneficial to human life. There is a useful comparison between the approaches of Weber on the one hand and of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown on the other in Beteille (2004). Weber (1978: 15) said, " We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the component individuals". Beteille (2004: 121-122) has commented,

> But his approach to the comparative study of society was different from the approach of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown because he had a different conception of society and a different assessment of the limits and possibilities of sociological inquiry. Sociological inquiry in his view was concerned with causes and functions, but it was also concerned with meaning, and there the organic analogy was more a hindrance than a help.

We may now turn to what replaced the functionalist approach.

4.5 What after Functionalism

As already mentioned, a major turn away from functionalism was towards recognising conflict as a central dimension of society. Increasingly we find that the concept of society becomes defined in terms of conflict and competition rather than harmony and function. Power and individual and group interests overshadow co-operation and altruism as leading forces of society.

The oppressive events of the twentieth century, the World Wars, the holocaust, the marginalisation and genocide of colonial rule, Vietnam and Korea, all combined to produce a critical approach to society where utopia was nowhere to be seen. Such theories like that of George Lukacs (1923) and Jugen Habermas (1985) were highly contemplative and emphasised processes such as intersubjectivity. They were deeply concerned with the dehumanising processes taking place in the world and also the role of theory in obliterating the human dimension. Oppression and human struggles in various parts of the world often became central themes of analysis (see Box 4.5 for the quotation from Giddens (1987) about Lukacs ideas).

Box 4.5 Lukacs' Ideas as mentioned in Giddens (1987: 235)

In between Weber and Parsons come Lukacs (1885-1971) and the Frankfurt school; and Habermas approaches his analysis of Parsonian thought via a 'critique of functionalist reason'. The connections between Weber's interpretation of rationalisation, Lukacs's discussion of reification, and the critique of instrumental reason formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, are clear. They all agree that an expanding rationalisation underlies the overall trend of development of western society. In spite of placing different emphases upon the character of rationalisation, these writers hold, like Weber, that the primacy accorded to purposive-rational action in modern culture produces both a loss of moral meaning in day-to-day life, and a diminution of freedom.
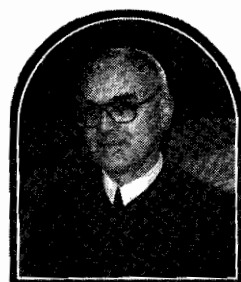
**George Lukacs
(1885-1971)**

Habermas' (1975) contribution can be summed up in his denial of science being the only form of knowledge available to humans. According to him there are three types of knowledge, namely, i) empirical analytic knowledge, ii) hermeneutic historical knowledge and iii) critical knowledge. The first is the type posited in the natural sciences and in traditional sociology. The second is the kind where we try to interpret the meaning systems through the analysis of historical texts and the third, that is, critical knowledge emerges out of our attempts to understand conditions of oppression.

Positivism persisted in theory in the period of what can be designated as 'high modernism' and is evident in the French structuralism. Of the French structuralism, the works of Levi-Strauss (1908-) had a lasting impact on the social sciences. Levi-Strauss (1949) extended the connection between structures of thought and the internal structure of the human brain borrowing from the theoretical principles of structural linguistics. The French version of structural Marxism became popular through the scholarly efforts of Meillasoux (1981), Terray (1972), Godelier (1977 and 1986) and others.

C Levi-Strauss
(1908-)

In fact structuralism emerged as an intellectual tradition in social theory. Like functionalism, it also derived its inspiration from Durkheim. While functionalism accepted the premises of biology, structuralism used linguistic models to explain social and cultural phenomena.

In the writings of Levi-Strauss, we find a kind of mixture of structuralism and functionalism. He wrote extensively on kinship systems, totemism and myth. His analysis of the logic of myth had a profound impact on the social sciences. In particular, his understanding of the notion of structure, conception of the unconscious and approach to history were taken as leading a new way of perceiving social reality. But Levi-Strauss (1969: 98) described his work as 'an initial statement' only.

In America the high tide of modernism was marked by a conceptualisation of culture as a publicly shared symbolic system, valid and internally coherent. Geertz's (1975) conceptualisation of cultural systems dominated the field of anthropology supported by his methodology of 'thick description'. His interpretative approach to the concept of culture, going into detailed observation and narrative descriptions, took anthropology deeper into the realm of the actors. Geertz clearly advocated a 'to and fro' journey between objectivism and reflexivity or a reflexive mode of understanding objective. The ethnographic experience of going deep into other people's experiences gave richness to his analysis that had a great impact.

C Geertz
(1926-)

.rent s a mentioned above gave an impetus to further shifts in theoretical analyses of social reality. This time you can notice qualitative differences

in the ways of perceiving the social world by post-modernists. In the next section, we will briefly look at the main currents in post-modernism[©].

Before going on to the next section, let us complete the Reflection and Action 4.1.

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Reflection and Action 4.1

Once again go through the three types of knowledge as given by Habermas (1985) and mentioned in Section 4.5 (What after Functionalism?) and provide at least two examples of each type from works of sociologists mentioned in the units already read by you. For titles of the various writings of these sociologists, you will need to look carefully at the list of references, given at the end of the book. Compare your examples with those of fellow learners at your Study Center and discuss them with your academic counselor for checking the accuracy of your selection of examples.

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4.6 Post-modernism

A major change took place in theory across the world and across social science theory with the deconstruction of the scientist as "white and male" (already mentioned in the last section of Unit 2). In fact a total changeover in perspective occurred in the form of post modernism that subjected the textual matter to a reflexive critique that goes into the politics of the construction of a text. All that has been written down is now viewed, not as descriptions of the "truth" per se but as constructions based upon the history, politics and strategy of authorship. Every concept taken for granted in the modernist era is now subjected to scrutiny. Culture, for example, is no longer to be viewed as a fixed entity, the symbolic representation of the mind of an identifiable group of people, but a shifting and contested process by which new identities are constructed.

The recognition of the process of "construction" was contingent upon the process of deconstruction[©]. In the post-nineteen-seventies era, the notions of deconstruction and destructuralisation spread across all fields of humanities, literature and art. The fixed faith in the definition of knowledge as that generated by western science was challenged, so was the so- called "progress" embodied in western civilisation. The entire notion that knowledge exists as "facts" that can be established with the help of western scientific methods, and even that there is a fixed "reality" out there, was criticised. The reason for this radical departure from modernism was the failure of western science and systems of knowledge to deliver the goods in a world threatened with environmental disasters, diseases such as AIDS, failure of civil society and deepening inequalities and injustice across the world. Another reason was the emergence of scholars from various race, class, ethnic, and gender categories. The central figure of the white and male scholar was displaced and taken over by a variety of others, who challenged the truth status of the findings. In the forefront were what are known as the colonial critique and the feminist critique.

A new generation of scholars confronted the political and economic realities of the 'colonial knowledge' by following the historical roots of the motivations and power equations involved in the production of such knowledge (See Box 4.6 for an example from India).

Box 4.6 Subaltern History

The chief product of radical departure in theoretical approach was a rewriting of history, of which the best examples in India are the series of books in *The New Cambridge History of India* and the series of books on subaltern history under the editorial leadership of Ranajit Guha (1982). Examples of what is known as the colonial critique and also a subaltern approach to history is reflected in the works of Partha Chattterjee (1993), Bernard Cohn (1996), Nicholas Dirks (1992) and others of the genre. The writings of Edward Said (1977) inspired many of the above-mentioned works.

The strongly critical point of view of feminism is reflected in Stanley and Wise's (1983) definition of feminism as directly confronting the idea that one person or set of people have the right to impose definitions of reality on others. This also makes it compatible with the post-modern concept of reality as situational.

Another stand taken by post-modernism was to resituate the researcher *vis-a vis* the researched more equally. The researched was no longer reduced to the status of a passive 'object of research' but became an equal partner in the production of knowledge. The sisterhood proclaimed by feminists was also related to an understanding of equality that could be achieved only if the producers of knowledge were from hitherto 'silenced' groups. The prominent feminist writer of color, Audre Lorde (1934-1992) is of the opinion that any discussion of feminist theory that ignores the perspectives of women of color, poor women and lesbians is suffering from academic arrogance (see Lorde 1989).

Post modernists, especially feminists, questioned the status of knowledge as value neutral, vertically arranged privileging the researcher and divorced from action. The activist scholar became an integral part of the late twentieth century academic world. Theory was finally liberated from its ivory tower and came down to the streets.

4.7 Trends other than Post-modernism

But post-modernism itself by its extreme reflexivity was unable to expose the real basis of human inequality. The problems of diversity and providing a critique of human situations of real inequality, human suffering and exploitation are still valid theoretically well into the twenty-first century. The nineteen-nineties witnessed a growing interest in the philosophies just before the emergence of post-modernism, namely phenomenology (see Unit 5), existentialism and hermeneutics (see Unit 8). Baudrillard (1968) turned Marxist theory over by according infrastructural status to

signifiers[©]. According to him, in the period of late capitalism there has been a fetishism of signifiers that is leading to creation of increased needs of consumption that in turn leads to increased production. The signs that earlier in Marxist perspective were seen as part of superstructure trigger the economic process. In the modern world advertisements are more important than class relations and consumption is related to abstract needs rather than real ones; the image assumes a higher grading than the material dimension of the article.

A concept that has gained prominence in this era is that of hegemony put forward by Gramsci (1891-1937). In his political writings (1921-1926), Gramsci situated dominance in the cultural process rather than brute power; showing how people act away from their own collective interests, once they accept the ideological point of view of the dominant groups of society.

Antonio Gramsci
(1891-1937)

The later part of the twentieth century saw scholars going into the finer dimensions of domination and the works of Foucault (1961, 1973 and 1979) have been accepted widely as a critique of established knowledge, showing the link between knowledge and power and the persuasive force of hegemony. The power of the written word and the arts and that of public culture has been theoretically established as the field of Cultural Studies. Culture is now not viewed as a given condition, having an objective existence worthy of systematic description but a site for contested identities, a vehicle for domination and also resistance, it becomes an instrument rather than an end product or given condition and it manifests itself in people's aspirations (for articulation of the concept of culture as people's aspirations see Nathan 2005).

A trend in the social sciences is towards a more material view of the world, looking into the conditions of existence, following a more Marxist view than a rarified post-modern view. The criticism of deconstruction has been that extreme deconstruction would take away the meaning of existence to the extent that even the rationale for a social science would cease to exist. Such a divergence of views had existed earlier in the twentieth century between the Structuralists and the Marxists; while the former were in favor of semiotic structures or structures of the mind, the latter saw reality in terms of material structures and economic exploitation.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2004), perhaps one the best known thinkers of contemporary times, tried to resolve the intellectual debates of the clash of points of view of Levi Strauss' structuralism and Marxism. Bourdieu observed the divergence between the synchronic, static and invariant nature of reality conditioned by deep underlying and unconscious mental structures that were by their very nature not subject to the dynamism of human volition as put forward by Levi-Strauss, and the conscious human subject, a product of history as put forward by Marxism. In fact,

Bourdieu (1977) attempted to demonstrate the effect over action produced by ideological structures. Bourdieu's theory of practice (see Box 4.7) demonstrated how abstract norms are manifested in real practices and real time to create real inequalities among real people.

Box 4.7 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu designated the unconscious dimension of naturalised ideologies as *doxa*. All that we take for granted and what never enters into any discourse, *doxa*[@] include deep-rooted habits as also conceptualisations regarding the world. The *habitus*[@] for Bourdieu is a kind of grounding for the individual actors, the unthinking playing out of internalised dispositions that are taken in as subjective states but externalised as objective actions that reproduce the conditions of their own existence. To him, all inequalities are cultural arbitrary in that they are produced and reproduced through internalised subjective states but have no objective rationality for their existence. However his theory is peculiarly lacking in accounting for human creativity and agency.
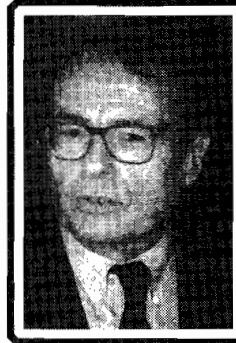
Pierre Bourdieu
(1930-2004)

In the present day context of globalisation, culture and society are becoming more and more amorphous as concepts. Identities are no longer seen as closed and definitive but contested, discordant and constitutive of disparate elements picked up both locally and globally. Traditions are no longer viewed as given but as reinvented every time.

Foucault's (1973) denunciation of western forms of knowledge as an instrument of domination rather than an instrument of truth has dealt a blow to all that was sanctified in the name of science. Now science is no longer an objective system of truth but a regional form of knowledge that had sought to supersede all other forms of knowledge by acts of force rather than reason. For social scientists it has meant that one takes a fresh look at the creation of the research subject, noting the positions of inequality between observer and observed, for the psychologists it meant that one reviews one's notion of normal and abnormal and think of them as cultural rather than absolute

Michel Foucault
(1926-1984)

conditions. But this process of destructuring of truth has its biggest triumph in that subjects have the option of refashioning themselves and resist the imposition of anything in the name of normal or given. The acceptance of diversity and the rejection of inequality have been a major effort of contemporary theory, reflecting and striving for a better world. This is the point when the call for active participation in the process of understanding and subsequently fashioning the social reality all around us is gaining recognition at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

4.8 Conclusion

Coming to the end of our long journey into theoretical perspectives in the social sciences, let us look at the current state-of-the-art in the practice of sociology in India. Methodologically speaking, in the light of a plethora of emerging perspectives in European and American sociology, practitioners of sociology and anthropology in India have not been blown off their feet and the mainstream scholarship in the social sciences in India has continued to combine reflexivity with a sense of commitment to healthy fact-finding methodology that is the legacy of positivism. It is not out of place here to mention what Mahatma Gandhi once said about keeping all windows open to receive influences from all sides but remaining careful to keep one's feet firmly on the ground. Way back in 1938 Sarat Chandra Roy wrote in *Man*,

> The objective methods of investigation of cultural data have to be helped out, not only by historical imagination and a background of historical and geographical facts, but also by a subjective process of self-forgetting absorption or meditation (*dhyana*), and intuition born of sympathetic immersion in, and self-confidence with, the society under investigation.

Almost following Roy's approach, Madan (2004: 200-202) has made a case for "the middle position", which means describing and interpreting the "concrete" and the "particular" and providing "causal explanations when doing so seems appropriate and possible", with the help of "abstract" and "general" concepts.

There has been a concern with tradition asserting itself as a cognitive style in the methodology of social research in India and Singh (1979: 291) has observed, "Whether sociology is a science with an accompanying universalistic package of categories and techniques of research or whether it is a cognitive style marked by a mode of apperception or reflexivity in observation and comparison of structures, social relationships and ideas, are questions which have been debated right from the inception of sociology in India".

It is not that social science researchers in India have been cut off from the global currents of thought and not from time to time expressed their explicit choices. Partho Nath Mukherji (2000: 53-58) has provided a long account of polemical debates in India between i) those, like Radhakamal Mukerjee (1889-1968), who worked out a synthesis between the physical sciences (see Mukerjee 1960), philosophy and the social sciences and those, like Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji (1894-1962), who stressed holisim and contextualisation as the main principles of sociological method (see Mukerji 1958) and those, like A. K. Saran (1962), who rejected sociology/ social science that is based on western sociology and values and therefore not in line with the Indian ethos, ii) those recommending fieldwork method and those opting for survey research. Trend reports in sociology and social anthropology, published by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, provide detailed accounts of leanings

and preferences of scholars (see Madan, 1972, Damle 1986, Jain 1986, Bose 1995). Mukherji observed (1998:27-28), "At the level of research, rigorous painstaking, academically committed research is on the decline....sociology and the social sciences are lagging far behind in generating social 'scientific' knowledge about the processes of conflict, structure and change in South Asian societies. Half-baked knowledge, tempered with mismatched borrowed Eurocentric concepts is far from helping appraise our overly complex social realities."

While recommending "disciplined eclecticism" of Merton (1976: 51), Mukherji (2000: 59) prefers the approach that 'requires an openness of mind regarding the efficiency of parallel paradigms, none of which need be rejected a priori nor espoused as though in it lay the essence of wisdom from which all social science puzzles could be solved'. So be it Mahatma Gandhi's approach of holding on to one's own ground or Madan's middle position or Mukherji's acceptance of Merton's disciplined eclecticism, knowledge production by social scientists in India is awaiting deeper preoccupations with the questions of logic of inquiry.

It would be a relevant exercise for learners of MSO 002 to look at the special issues of the Delhi-based international journal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, on such themes as labor, migration, caste and class, tradition and modernity, etc, and examine the methodological approaches taken by the authors of the various articles in these issues. Similarly, one can scan articles published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Sociological Bulletin* to identify the theoretical orientations of the authors. Recent studies in the areas of gender studies and Dalit movement may provide you examples of reflexive sociology, currently in use in India (see also unit 7). For Reflection and Action 4.2 you need to identify the methodology followed in only two articles, mentioned below.

Reflection and Action 4.2

Read the following two articles and identify the theoretical orientation of the author of each article.

❖ *Fazalbhoy*, Nasreen 2000. Rituals of Protection in a Muslim Community. *Eastern Anthropologist* 53(4): 443-455

❖ *Rege*, Sharmila 2000. Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra. *Sociological Bulletin* 49(2): 193-210

Further Reading 📚

Bose, Pradip Kumar 1995. *Research Methodology*. Indian Council of Social Science Research: New Delhi (for an extensive survey of works on research methods and methodologies by sociologists in India)

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