

Classical Sociological Theory
Professor. R. Santhosh
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 02
Sociological Perspective

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Sociological Perspective



- Introducing a discipline by explaining about its perspective
- The distinct view point of the discipline; the exclusive explanatory framework of the subject
- Similarities and differences with other major social sciences



Welcome to this session, in which we will begin a couple of lectures with the aim to understand the term Sociological Perspective. So, what does this term sociological perspective mean and why is it important? We are beginning the discussion of a new discipline sociology by focusing on the classical social theorists who laid the theoretical foundation of the discipline. So, before entering into these theorists and their theories, it is important that we have a clear idea regarding what this particular discipline mean.

You can approach a discipline or you can get introduced to a discipline in two ways. One of the ways is to understand the basic concepts and frameworks of the discipline or the other way is to understand the unique perspective of the discipline. What is the unique nature or what is a unique offering of this particular discipline? I would be following the second way in which we will have a very detailed discussion about what is sociological perspective.

The word ‘perspective’ is widely understood or we can explain it as the distinctive viewpoint of a discipline or the exclusive explanatory framework of the discipline. What does it mean? Every discipline such as sociology or political science or economics will have a very unique and

distinctive viewpoint, a particular point of view or a particular explanatory paradigm, which offers us a unique understanding about the subject matter that we are going to study. It is referred as the 'perspective' of that discipline

We are discussing about such kind of an exclusive explanatory framework that is unique to this particular discipline of sociology. This uniqueness is the one which separates sociology from other major social sciences like political science, history or psychology. Therefore, it is extremely important that we get some familiarity with this particular idea of 'sociological perspective'.

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Sociological Perspective Reference materials



1. Chapter I 'The Promise' from 'The Sociological Imagination' by C. Wright Mills (1959)
2. Chapter 2, 'Sociology as a form of consciousness' from 'Invitation to Sociology' by Peter Berger (1963)
3. Introduction 'Sociology: What For?' from 'Thinking Sociologically' by Zygmunt Bauman (1995)

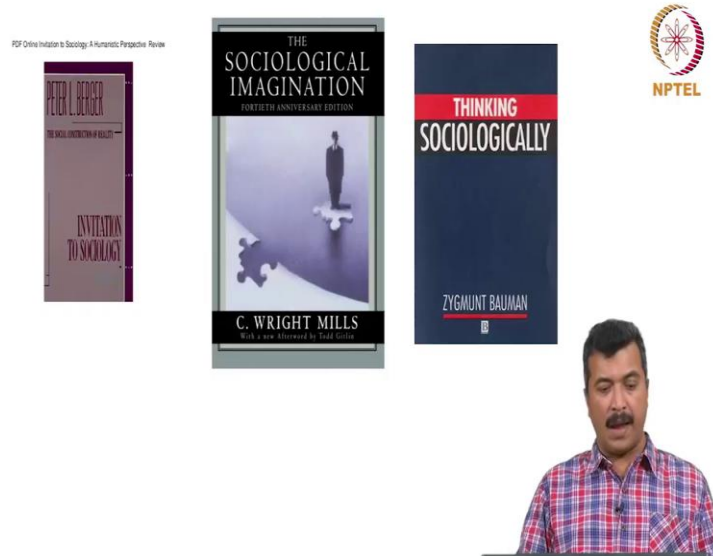


These are the three major reference materials that we will be using for these lectures. Each of this lectures will revolve around these three reference materials. The first one is the chapter 'The Promise' from the book 'Sociological Imagination' by C. Wright Mills. And the second material will be chapter two, titled 'Sociology as a form of consciousness' from the book 'Invitation to Sociology' by Peter Berger. The third will be the introduction chapter titled 'Sociology: What For?' by Zygmunt Bauman from the book titled 'Thinking Sociologically'. These are some of the widely used materials across the globe.

As you must be seeing here that these books, especially the books by C. Wright Mills and Peter Berger were written much earlier that were published in 1959 and 1963 respectively while

Zygmunt Bauman's is relatively recent. However, they are widely considered as the classic books to introduce the discipline of sociology discipline to the students.

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These are the images of the three books that we will be using throughout this lecture. Peter Berger's Invitation to Sociology, Sociological Imagination by C. Wright Mills, and Thinking Sociologically by Zygmunt Bauman. These books are available in most of the book shops and in online platforms and I would urge you to buy and read these books.

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Peter Berger 'Sociology as
a form of consciousness'



We begin with the essay by Peter Berger, 'Sociology as a form of consciousness'. The title itself is very instructive because he is talking about sociology as a particular kind of a consciousness that you need to acquire, a kind of a consciousness that provides you with certain kind of understanding about the world. It is a very important concept. It means a kind of sociological consciousness that somebody develops by studying this discipline and this consciousness offers a particular understanding of the society around one's own life.

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- Sociological meaning of society: 'The sociologist thinks of "society" as denoting a large complex of human relationships, as referring to a system of interaction'.



- How large?

- What is social? Social-to refer to the quality of interaction, interrelationship and mutuality

- The sociologist does not look at phenomena that nobody else is aware of. But she looks at the same phenomena in a different way.



Now, if somebody ask you, what does sociology study? The most common answer is that, sociology studies society. Then what is society? Again, you get a set of answers because the term society is widely used and it is a very common word in our everyday life. We have housing societies, we have societies for women, societies for particular purposes and so on. Therefore, society is a very common term. But in the discipline of sociology, such common terms acquire very specific meanings.

In sociology, the term society acquires a very specific meaning and it is not used in a very loose manner. What is the sociological meaning of society? Or what is the sociological definition of society. A sociologist thinks of society as denoting a large complex of human relationships, referring to a system of interaction and this is a one of the widely used definitions of society in sociology. There are different understandings of society within the sociology as the discipline

has been defined by different scholars differently. For example, Emile Durkheim defines, sociology as a study of social facts.

Max Weber would define sociology as the study of social action. However, the generally accepted definitions of sociology is that that sociology is the study of the large complex web of human relationships. Therefore, we are specifically focusing on the complex set of human relationships that exist among human beings when they interact together. The term 'interaction' is very important.

There is a mutuality, there is a correspondence and it is not a one sided action. People interact with each other and that produce a complex web of relationships. This term 'web of relationship' is another widely used term to refer to the subject matter of sociology. Sociology studies this web of relationship which acquire a certain patterns or in other words we call it as forms of social interaction.

The immediate question then be, how large must be a society? There is no specific answer, but we can confidently say that, an interaction is possible only if there are two or more people. Then, what kind of interaction? What we have in mind is not very cursory exchange between two strangers. That does not really constitute an interaction. Rather, the social we define, refers to the quality of interaction in the relationships with an element of mutuality. This term mutuality is very important.

Our understanding of social relationship comprises of very close relationships as well as, not so close relationships that exist among people, either in small or large numbers and that have this quality of mutuality. These relationships and their specific features, their specific characters, and their specific orientations and their changing forms constitute the subject matter of sociology.

Obviously it is very clear that the sociologists does not look at the phenomenon that nobody else is aware of and this is an important aspect. Unlike a psychologist who can claim that a psychological analysis is his or her unique area of investigation, such claims of exclusivity is not shared usually by other social scientists.

He or she looks into the psychological processes that are happening inside somebody's mind, but sociology will not or cannot make any such kind of claims about exclusivity, rather sociologists

does not have any field of their own interest which nobody else is aware of. What is more fascinating and more interesting is that a sociologist looks at this same phenomena that everybody else looks at, but from a different way and from a very unique perspective.

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- The ability to 'look behind' or to 'see through' the façade of social structure. Became possible in Europe after the collapse of Christendom and the absolute state after the Reformation
- The ability to look beyond the official accounts, public discourses, propaganda, popular assumptions and so on..
- example of love marriage. "When certain conditions are met or have been constructed, one allows oneself to 'fall in love'"
- Functioning of democracy, or organization of an industry
- Is this ability uniquely modern?



One of the interesting ways in which Peter Berger defines this sociological consciousness is the ability to look behind or to see through the facade of social structure. This is a very important term. The ability to look behind or the ability to see through the facade of social structure. Berger argues that this particular practice of looking at it became possible in Europe after the collapse of Christendom and the collapse of the absolute state after reformation that happened in Christianity.

What does the 'ability to look beyond or the ability to look behind or to see through the façade of social structure' mean? This particular argument will become more clear when we proceed further and when we discuss the emergence of sociology and the kind of important theoretical arguments, philosophical viewpoints behind the emergence of this particular discipline.

Berger would argue that sociology offers you a particular ability to understand social structure, which shapes our immediate social realities, and the ability to look behind or to look through the façade of social structure. This ability to look beyond the facade of social structure, the way in which our society is structured, how the society is structured on the basis of economic relations,

on the basis of class relations, on the basis of gender relations and other social structures are extremely important and that provide us with very specific meanings.

Sociology offers you an opportunity to look behind or to see through these particular things. Berger says that, this ability became a reality in Europe, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Does it mean that the people who lived elsewhere, for example, in countries like India or in Arabia or in other parts of the world did not develop this particular ability? Or does this again raise the question whether people who live in Europe before this eighteenth and nineteenth century did not develop these abilities? Of course they must have, but none of these things became institutionalized.

Before the emergence of modernity, none of these things became institutionalized and they remained mostly at the individual level. But here we are talking about the emergence of sociology as a discipline, which is institutionalized in Europe during this particular time. It is an important point in which we understand how social context can generate new theories, new frameworks, and even new social sciences. For example, Berger gives us a quite a lot of examples in his essay on the ability to look beyond official accounts of certain incidents, the public discourses, the propaganda, the popular assumptions, and so on.

In this era of saturated media, we are bombarded with quite a lot of information and propaganda, about which we say that we are living in a post fact or post truth era. Therefore, at this era, the ability to look beyond the official versions and the ability to look at look beyond the public discourses, the ability to look beyond popular assumptions and popular opinion is really important.

This is important at the level of the discipline, as well as at the level of as the practitioners. It is also important at the individual level and in the way in which we understand our own life and the society around us. How do we process all this information? How do we get a picture with better clarity about the way in which society functions and the way in which we live in the society, we can live in the society, and we are expected to live in this particular society.

Berger gives a very interesting example of love marriage, where he says that the common assumption behind love marriage is that, people fall in love at the first sight and there is something that connects them immediately and therefore people fall in love. He says that, there

are certain conditions which are necessary for most people to fall in love. He says, if you dissect that, you will understand that, only when certain conditions have met or have been constructed, one allows oneself to fall in love. This is a very interesting argument as it looks into how personal preferences actually work between two people who fall in love.

For example, how are their perceptions about beauty ,perceptions about family status ,about race, about their specific congruence in terms of their ideology and so on are extremely important in deciding whether one has to fall in love or not. Therefore, the romanticized idea of two people falling in love because of some forces appears more problematic because once you analyze you understand that there are very important material conditions and very important calculated moves, calculated decisions behind this act of falling in love.

Berger provides this example, which really is instructive for us to understand how even some of the very common examples like falling in love needs to be analyzed. Once you extend this argument, for example, on the functioning of democracy, or on a particular organization of an industry and examine how it works, you will get very interesting insights. We have a very rosy picture about how democracy is supposed to work. Most of our politicians will have a very rosy picture about how their governments upholds the principles and spirit of democracy.

But if you dig bit deeper and examine the way in which these systems function, we will realize that many of these promises and processes are problematic and democracy is not functioning the way it is ought to function. In a particular context, the practices as well as discourses of democracy assumes specific character by responding to or by navigating with the nature of socio economic and political processes.

The ability to look beyond the existing arguments and narratives and public opinion is the most important contribution of sociology. Similarly, Sociology explores the whole idea about how an industry or an organization functions and (whole industrial sociology emerged as an area which actually specializes in this), how organization has its own a social character, how organization has its own social ethos which many times contradict the official version of the the way in which an organization is run.

We have talked about this whole idea, but whether is this ability uniquely modern? As we mentioned, this particular way of looking at society was not or it is not uniquely modern, it

existed, but its emergence as a systematic institutionalized discipline happened only in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. That is the distinctive character of what we understand as a European modernity, which played a very important role in the emergence of sociology as a discipline.

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- Distinction between 'social problem' and 'sociological problem'
- A social problem defined by the law? Or State?
- Thus the sociological problem is not so much why some things "go wrong" from the viewpoint of the authorities but how the whole system works in the first scene, place, what are its presuppositions and by what means it is held together.



Peter Berger has a very interesting analysis or a distinction between 'social problem' and 'sociological problem'. Let us spend some time trying to understand that distinction. Most of you must be familiar with this term social problem. What is a social problem? A social problem is usually considered as something that is not desirable in a society, something that is injurious to society or something that is detrimental to the society.

There is a long list of such so called 'social problems' starting with poverty, unemployment, corruption, terrorism, beggary and a host of other issues which are widely considered as unwanted or injurious to the society. What is the distinction between a social problem and sociological problem? Social problem are those issues that are undesirable or injurious or considered as negative and mostly defined by the law and or by the state. There is a very close connection between social problems with law and the state.

Most of the social problems are defined by the popular opinion backed by legal provisions as well as by the state. But sociological problem is different. Of course, there is a sociological problem behind every social problem, but sociological problem is a broader term. It has to do

with the question of a disciplinary engagement with a particular situation. You can develop sociological questions about everything. Sociological problems need not be the situation which are defined as negative or detrimental.

Berger argues that the sociological problem is not so much about why something go wrong from the viewpoint of the authorities, but how the whole system works in the first scene, place, where and what are its presuppositions and by what means it is held together. For example, imagine a classroom where a teacher is teaching forty or fifty students and there is pin drop silence in the class. This particular classroom raises quite a lot of interesting sociological questions.

What are the assumptions on the basis this whole exchange or the whole interaction between the students and teachers is taking place? What is their understanding of this whole knowledge of learning? How do they understand the role of the teacher? What are the kind of authority that the teacher perceives for himself? What is the kind of power relation between the teacher and the student? What is understood as the transmission of the knowledge? How does the teacher understand the role of the student in this whole process? Are they seen as the mere recipients of t knowledge?

Or are they seen as the people who are contributing in the generation of the knowledge that must take place in the space of classrooms? These kinds of questions are very important and these are not social problems, rather they are sociological problems. Here, you are asking very important questions about a particular social interaction. Similarly, take the example of your own house. What is the kind of arrangement between gender roles in your house? Who does what kind of jobs? Whether your father helps your mother in cooking? Who does the cleaning? Who does the cooking?

What are the kind of assumptions about what constitutes man's job and woman's job? What kind of gender stereotypes are prevalent? What kind of changes happened over a period of time? How do people negotiate these kind of spaces within their own houses? Each of these questions open up very fascinating areas of inquiry, which can be broadly understood as sociological problems or sociological questions.

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• "The fundamental sociological problem is not crime but the law, not divorce but marriage, not racial discrimination but racially defined stratification, not revolution but government."

• "We would contend, then, that there is a debunking motif inherent in sociological consciousness. The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social systems she is studying."



Here is a very interesting paragraph from Berger. "The fundamental sociological problem is not crime but the law, not divorce but marriage, not racial discrimination but racially defined stratification, not revolution but government". It is a beautiful statement that combines a set of social problems as well as sociological problems. You see that the social problems appear less significant or social problems appear only as a manifestation or as a side effect of a larger sociological problems. For example, look at the case between the crime and the law. What is the relation between crime and the law?

You must be knowing that, an act becomes a crime only when the law defines as such. Take the case of murder. A murder is widely seen as a crime and it is punishable under the law. But murder of an enemy soldier is not something punishable and most often it will be rewarded. So, more than focusing on the crime. It is important for a sociologist to focus on the question of law. How does law gets constituted, and how does it gets changed, what is the relationship between this official law and the popular perception?

These questions really open up very fascinating questions. Some of the acts can become criminalized by the law and later get decriminalized. Take the example of recent judgment about homosexuality being decriminalized. It was widely considered as a historic judgment which decriminalize a particular act of sexual relationship. Thereby liberating, thousands or millions of people who till then were branded as criminals. Similarly, take the whole question of divorce and

marriage. Sociologists are more interested in the changing forms of marriage, rather than understanding the changing forms of divorce.

Suppose if somebody asks a question that why there were very few divorces some three or four decades back and why the divorce rates are very high now. Then the answer comes back to the question of marriage and its changing character and composition. The people who enter into the institutional marriage and their aspirations, their independence, their economic stability, their ideologies, their orientations and so on are very different from the people who entered into a wedlock three or four decades back. Therefore, instead of focusing on divorce, it is important that we focus on the institution to which this divorce is only a side effect.

Similar is the case with racial discrimination and racially defined stratification, revolution and government. Berger argues that we would contend that there is a debunking motif inherent in sociological consciousness. The sociologist will be driven time and again by the very logic of his discipline in order to debunk social system she is studying. Therefore this term 'debunking motif' is very important. This term gets repeated in the writings of Zygmunt Bauman as well.

What does debunking motif which Berger argues as inherent in sociological consciousness, one of the inherent motifs of sociological consciousness. It is to look behind and look through things and to not accept things at its face value and to not go by the popular narrative, to not go by the immediately visible things, but the ability to look behind or the ability to see through the kind of narratives that are presented to you.

This is why the whole argument about debunking becomes important and the sociologists will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his or her discipline to debunk the social system that she is studying. Therefore a systematic study of social systems and its structure is something very important for a person to develop her sociological imagination along with a debunking motive, so that you understand the society in a far better and clearer manner.

That is the promise of sociological perspective. That is the promise of sociological consciousness. Through the discipline of sociology, you acquire the kind of a consciousness that allows you to understand, to look at society and make sense of the society in a far better way. We will conclude this session here and we will continue with the same topic in the next day as well. Thank you.