

# Sociology

## CHAPTER -2

### b. Positivism and its Critique

# Syllabus

## 2. Sociology as Science:

Science, scientific method and critique

Major theoretical strands of research methodology.

Positivism and its critique

Fact value and objectivity

Non- positivist methodologies

# Positivism

Aims at understanding the world as **cause and effect** relations that can be **observed**.

Draws from -

**Empiricism** (what is seen or observable)

**Inductivism** (supremacy of facts)

**Naturalism** (influence of external environment on actions)

# Positivism

Positivism has influence of enlightenment ideologies

**Saint Simon** – Sociology as **Social Physics**  
Advocated **Organic Analogy** to study Society

**Auguste Comte** - introduced positivism in Sociology  
(Sociological Positivism- objects are real not by material presence but in terms of their effects also)

Sociology to be studied using methodologies like  
Reductional Analysis, Causal Analysis, Comparative Analysis and  
Generalisations

Studying Socio as a Natural Science

**Book** – Course in Positive Philosophy, System of Positive Polity

## Emile Durkheim

Positivism enriched by concept of **social facts**.

Even recording things which are not directly observable (like Customs, Belief Systems) but affect humans from outside. Used in DOL, Religion, Suicide.

## Merton

Used in his study of **Reference Group Behaviour**.

Collected data on American Soldiers to show Relative Deprivation.

## Karl Marx

His works used data from history. He is a positivist yet not a positivist (While discussing Capitalism – positivist, Exploitation – Revolutionary, Communism – Romantic Philosopher)

# Elements of positivism can be summarised as

1) Study of **observable** phenomena and collecting information for the same  
**Rejecting the study of internal side**

2) Use of **scientific methods** initially supposed to be similar to Natural Sciences

But later more specific methods devised

Example – **Durkheim's** theory of suicide classical exhibition of positivist methodology conclusions drawn using multivariate analysis

Also, Durkheim – Use of data on Suicide Rates, Religious membership

3) Stress on **Universal Theories**

4) Creation of **testable** knowledge, i.e., **reliability**

5) Emphasising absolute **objectivity, total value freedom.**

# Criticism

Obsession for positivism has been lost but it provided initial motivation for sociology to establish.

## Various problems

### 1) **Interpretative School** **Weber, Dilthey**

Not possible to study human behavior using methods of natural sciences.

2) Sociology should be concerned with **SU of OR** (Subjective Understanding of Objective Reality)

### 3) **Post Modernists** **Derrida, Foucault**

Reality can be studied in many ways.

### 4) **Interactionist** **Mead, Cooley, Blumer**

Actions and **Interactions** result in Social Actions

# Criticism

## 5) **Phenomenologist** **Peter Berger, Schutz**

Generalisations not possible.

Positivism is not concerned with Sociology but is concerned with making  
Science out of Sociology

Social realities are made, dismantled and remade

## 6) **Ethnomethodologists** **Garfinkel**

Reality be studied from People's perspective and not Researcher's  
perspective

7) Positivists themselves **divided** between use of Inductivism or deductivism

# Criticism

8) **Paul Feyerabend**  
Gave the idea of **anti-methodology**.

9) **Alvin Gouldner**  
**Reflexive Sociology**  
(individual reflects on his/her own actions)

10) **Anthony Giddens**  
Theory of **Structuration**

11) **RK Merton**  
Over emphasizing Universal theories  
Instead use Middle-Ranged theories

# Criticism

## 12) **Gunnar Myrdal**

Complete objectivity not desirable.

13) **Intestability** of various positivist theories. Like Parsons

## 14) **Jurgen Habermas**

**Since humans study humans**, thus, complete separation of facts and values not possible.

## 15) **Max Horkheimer**

Positivism is engaged in '**objective anarchism**', an obsession to study everything objectively.