

## **Module-1**

# **THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

**Developed by:**

**Dr. Subrata Chatterjee**  
**Associate Professor of Sociology**  
**Khejuri College**  
**P.O- Baratala, Purba Medinipur**  
**West Bengal, India**

# THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Generally the Sociological Perspectives is divided into three types:

1. *The Structural/Functional Perspective*
2. *The Conflict Perspective*
3. *Symbolic/Interactionist Perspective*

## **STRUCTURAL – FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

In Structural-Functional Perspective, society is viewed as a complex system of parts (structures) that interact to perform various essential functions. It deals with shared values, norms, attitudes and beliefs (consensus) of individuals in the society. In this perspective, change is generally viewed as disruptive and gradual. Thus this approach uses macrosociological paradigms to analyze social systems.

## **CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE**

The Conflict Perspective views society as a struggle for resources and power. According to this perspective, change is inevitable in society; it is often beneficial but can sometimes be violent. Conflict between the classes determines social change as some groups prosper at the expense of others. In this approach, conflict is deemed as universal, social consensus is limited and inequality is widespread. Like Structural Functional approach, Conflict Perspective is also considered as macrosociological in nature.

## **SYMBOLIC/ INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE**

This perspective is different from the earlier two as it approaches social systems from microsociological viewpoint. It analyses society through interactions within individuals and small groups. According to this perspective, interaction between individuals is negotiated through shared symbols, gestures and nonverbal communication. Without social interaction, human beings cannot survive. This approach tries to unravel how individuals experience one another, interpret the meaning of these interactions and how they construct a sense of self and the society as a whole from these interactions.

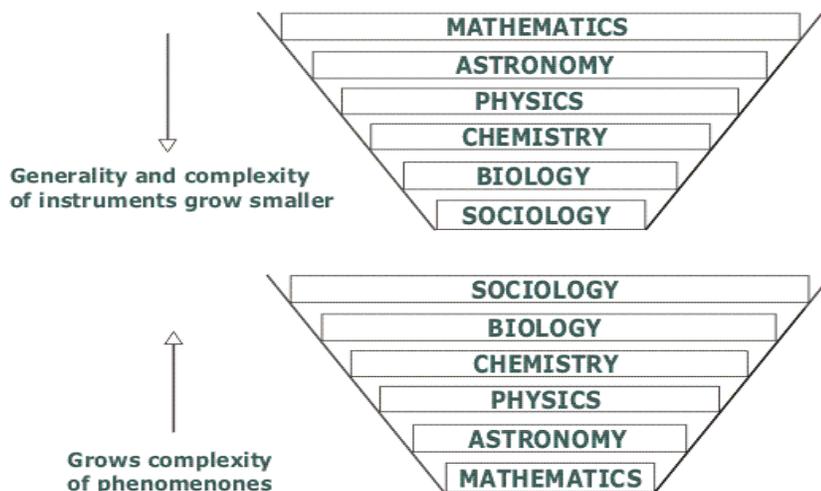
# PIONEERING SOCIOLOGISTS

AUGUSTE COMTE

(1798-1857)



Auguste Comte, a French Sociologist, is considered as the founding father of Sociology. He is credited to have coined the term “sociology”. Influenced by the utopian socialist Henri Saint-Simon, Comte adopted *positivism*, developing the concept of *sociologie* as the queen of sciences. Comte was a major influence on 19th-century thought, influencing the work of social thinkers such as Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill and Émile Durkheim. Comte believed that society could be studied like any other science. Comte believed that “each of our leading conceptions – each branch of our knowledge – passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive.” This is known as Law of Three Stages.



Comte's Hierarchy of Sciences

## ÉMILE DURKHEIM

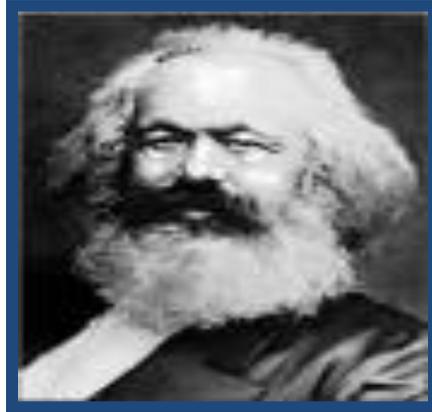
(1858-1917)



Émile Durkheim, one of the founding thinkers of sociology, was born in France on April 15, 1858. Durkheim's body of work focused on how it is that a society can form and function, which is another way of saying, how it can maintain order and stability. Durkheim referred to how we bind together around a shared culture as solidarity. Through his research, he found that this was achieved through a combination of rules, norms, and roles; the existence of a "collective conscience," which refers to how we think in common given our shared culture; and through the collective engagement in rituals that remind us of the values we share in common, of our group affiliation, and our shared interests. For this reason, he is considered the creator of the functionalist perspective within sociology. Durkheim was most interested in the glue that holds society together, which means he focused on the shared experiences, perspectives, values, beliefs, and behaviors that allow people to feel that they are a part of a group and that working together to maintain the group is in their common interest. These shared values and beliefs which transcend the individual and integrated them into a larger social whole was termed by Durkheim as Social Fact.

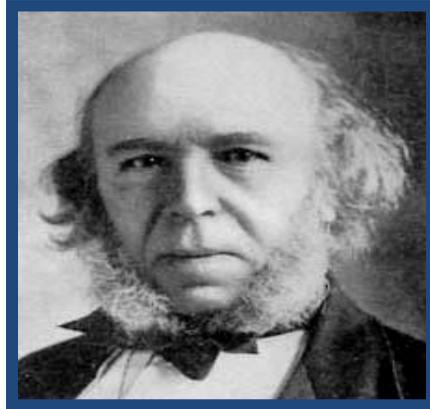
In essence, Durkheim's work was all about culture, and it remains deeply relevant and important to how sociologists study culture today. His famous study on suicides (1897) is considered as a seminal work on that topic. His use of statistics has contributed to the development of quantitative methodology in sociological research. Durkheim's work is also useful to sociologists who rely on his concept of anomie to study the way violence often crops up -- whether to the self or others -- in the midst of societal change.

**KARL MARX**  
**(1818-1883)**



Karl Marx is considered as one of the founding figures of the political / economic theory of socialism (communism). Born on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1818, in Trier, Prussia (now Germany), Marx is considered as the founder of the Conflict Perspective. Marx provided the theoretical basis for his conviction that societies have evolved historically through class struggle. Marx was influenced by Hegel's dialectical idealism which he inverted to apply to the material world. According to Marx, dialectics is universal. There is a continual conflict between matter and consciousness in the natural world and each phenomenon is engendered by this conflict. It is this conflict which lies as the source of progress. Marx applied this idea to human history, hence delineating a gradual development of human society through different stages shaped by changes in production systems, means of production and production relationships which gave rise to the changing of class struggle. This is Marx's famous theorization of historical materialism. According to Marx, class is a group of people who share similar stage in the hierarchy of production relationships. He has divided the concept of class into two categories – primary and secondary classes. Class struggle is generally witness between primary classes. Marx developed a scathing critique of modern capitalism which leads to the notion of alienation. He pointed out that modern, industrial society, individuals are alienated from product, production processes, society and even from themselves. Further, he pointed out that under capitalism, the bourgeoisie i.e. the capitalists, have become the owners of the production systems. This has resulted in a systematic exploitation of the labourers, who are termed as proletariats. Marx was convinced that capitalism would breed dialectical conflict between these two classes to such an extent that it would lead to revolution, eventually paving the way for the establishment of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. In socialist society, class differentiations would disappear eventually leading to the establishment of a classless society.

**HERBERT SPENCER**  
**(1820-1903)**



He developed Structural- Functionalist approach in sociology. This influence is placed right alongside those of Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, and Emile Durkheim. In helping to explain the structural-functional perspective, which simply believes that society is made up of various structures (or parts) and that each has a function (or a job) to perform, we see that when all the structures are performing their functions correctly, then society as a whole runs stable and smooth. Spencer equated this perspective to the human body: the body is made up of the structural parts like the skeleton, muscles and internal organs. Each of these structures serves a function, and the body runs smoothly if all functions are running correctly. As an English sociologist and philosopher, he advocated of the theory of evolution. He achieved an influential synthesis of knowledge, advocating the preeminence of the individual over society and of science over religion. Spencer was one of the most-argumentative and most-discussed English thinkers of the Victorian period. His strongly scientific orientation led him to urge the importance of examining social phenomena in a scientific way. He believed that all aspects of his thought formed a coherent and closely ordered system. Science and philosophy, he held, gave support to and enhanced individualism and progress. Spencer first derived his general evolutionary scheme from reflection on human society is seen in *Social Statics*, in which social evolution is held to be a process of increasing “individuation.” He saw human societies as evolving by means of increasing division of labour from undifferentiated hordes into complex civilizations. Spencer believed that the fundamental sociological classification was between military societies, in which cooperation was secured by force, and industrial societies, in which cooperation was voluntary and spontaneous.

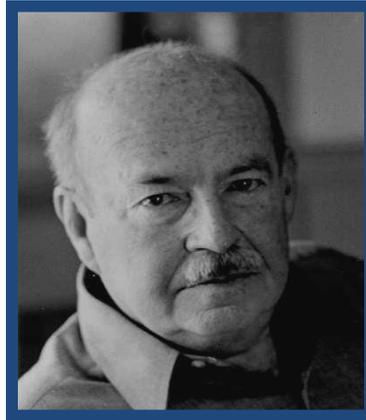
It was Herbert Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' due to the fact that he believed human behavior was designed in a way that strives for self-preservation. Darwin later used the term 'survival of the fittest' in his edition of *Origins of the Species*. The theory of social Darwinism created the thinking of the 'survival of the fittest' as that the strongest and the fittest should survive and flourish in society, and the weak should be allowed to die out. This allowed Spencer to believe that the rich and powerful became so because they were better-suited to the social and economic climate of the time. He believed it was natural or normal that the strong survived at the cost of the weak

**MAX WEBER**  
**(1864-1920)**



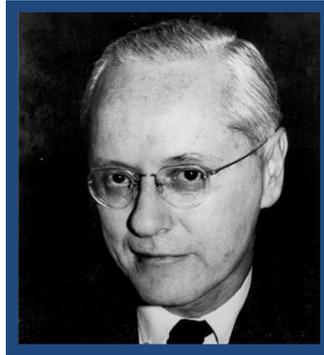
Max Weber believed that sociologists could never capture the reality of society but should focus on ideal types that best capture the essential features of aspects of social reality. Weber's profound influence on sociological theory stems from his demand for objectivity in scholarship and from his analysis of the motives behind human action. Weber's intellectual breadth in the study of societies can hardly be overestimated; it surpassed that of his predecessors, mainly Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. Dissatisfied with the intellectual traditions of the social sciences and law in German and Western universities, Weber sought to develop a scientific approach that overcame their deficiencies. Although he never fully defined a systematic research program explaining his comparative methodology, his essays on the historical development of Eastern and Western societies suggest what such an approach might entail. Weber demonstrated that the comparative method was essential because the behaviour of institutions in societies could not be understood in isolation. In preparation for work that he contemplated but never completed, Weber developed the ideal type as a methodological tool for comparative sociology. In analyzing the history of Western societies, Weber focused on rationalism as a unique and central force shaping all Western institutions, including economics, politics, religion, family, stratification systems, and music. These typologies have had a decisive impact on the development of subsequent, more specialized sociological inquiries. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is Weber's best known and most controversial work which illustrates the general trend of his thinking. Weber began by noting the statistical correlation in Germany between interest and success in capitalist ventures on the one hand and Protestant background on the other. He then attributed this relationship between capitalism and Protestantism to certain accidental psychological consequences of the notions of predestination and calling in Puritan theology.

**TALCOTT PARSONS**  
**(1902-1979)**



Talcott Parsons was one of the most influential structural functionalists of the 1950s. As a structural functionalist, Parsons was very, very interested in the idea of social order. Like many of his structural functionalist cronies, he held to the functional theory of stratification, the idea that hierarchical class systems and orders were necessary for society to function. Although it sounds rather foreign to some modern minds, structural functionalists felt inequality was a necessary part of any working society since inequality is what they believed kept society ticking along. To break it down, they might say it this way: 'if everyone felt equal, there would be no desire for a person to achieve more.' To use a familiar phrase, there'd be no desire to keep 'moving' on up!' Without this desire for individual improvement, society as a whole would stagnate. Therefore, in the mind of the structural functionalist, inequality functions to keep individuals striving upward. This, in turn, keeps the structure of society not just intact but moving forward. As a functionalist, he was concerned with how elements of society were functional for a society. He was also concerned with social order, but argued that order and stability in a society are the result of the influence of certain values in society, rather than in structure such as the economic system. For example, he believed that stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialization. Parsons also contributed to our understanding of medicine, arguing that medicine is our strategy to keep members of a society healthy, and illness is dysfunctional because it undermines people's ability to perform their roles in a society. Finally, he argued that American society needs to find roles for the elderly.

**ROBERT K. MERTON**  
**(1910-2002)**



Robert King Merton is a self-styled “Durkheimian,” writing very much in the functional tradition. In conceiving of society as a system it becomes natural to see it, like other systems, as composed of parts that are interrelated and whose operations have consequences on the whole. He was heavily influenced by Pitirim Sorokin who tried to balance large-scale theorizing with a strong interest in empirical research and statistical studies. This and Paul Lazarsfeld influenced Merton to occupy himself with middle-range theories. Middle range theories of R.K Merton came as rejection of mega theory of Parsonian sociology. His theory advocates that theory building in sociology should not be governed by intellectual aggression or academic speculation. Sociological theories cannot afford to be rogue, unrealistic, jargon focused and simply logical. Rather theories are developed in sociology to arrange the empirical facts in a consolidated manner. Hence sociological theories should be fact driven. The social theories should be coming out of facts to explain the facts in a systematic manner. Instead of being concerned about mega speculations that there is a social system where there is exchange, negotiation, convergence, consequently control and integration sociology must look into the actual problems and issues related to empirical situations. Middle Range theories in sociology advocate that how to sociological research facts are important than theories. It gives rise to a situation where facts speak for themselves. These theories are small understandable, on controversial universally acceptable conceptual devices coming out of a given empirical situation having capacity to explain same or different types of situations without any possible ambiguities or controversies. Parsons' work tends to imply that all institutions are inherently good for society. Merton emphasizes the existence of dysfunctions. He thinks that something may have consequences that are generally dysfunctional or which are dysfunctional for some and functional for others. On this point he approaches conflict theory, although he does believe that institutions and values Merton states that only by recognizing the dysfunctional aspects of institutions, can we explain the development and persistence of alternatives. Merton's concept of dysfunctions is also central to his argument that functionalism is not essentially conservative. Merton developed the concept of manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are the consequences that people observe or expect, latent functions are those that are neither recognized nor intended. While Parsons tends to emphasize the manifest functions of social behavior, Merton sees attention to latent functions as increasing the understanding of society: the distinction between manifest and latent forces the sociologist to go beyond the reasons individuals give for their actions or for the existence of customs and institutions; it makes them look for other social consequences that allow these practices' survival and illuminate the way society works.