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THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXCURSION

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***Abstract:** This paper traces the emergence of sociological thought from the 18th to 19th century. Its central thread depicts a rich discipline with firm foundations in the context of socio-historical setting for its growth and development. It takes the reader through a historical path of sociological thought and contrasting discourse of early philosophers, enlightenment era, post-enlightenment phase and emergence of a distinctive subject matter of sociology. My arguments and insights also offer an account of birth of a discipline whose genesis is inextricably intertwined with central themes that were at the core of philosophical thought, enlightenment and post-enlightenment development.*

***Keywords:** sociological theorization, Philosophical thought, Sociology, enlightenment, post-enlightenment, atomistic individualism, positivism and counter-positivism.*

1.1 Social setting of 18th and 19th Century

The birth of sociological thought can be traced back to a considerable extent of the days of French and English enlightenment. By sociological thought, it meant awakening and awareness of society as distinctive object of study, as system or structure objectively determined by law and processes. However, during the enlightenment period there were efforts to give prominence to eighteenth century philosophy, history and political economy which were critical to the discipline of sociology although they were not solved sociologically. Hence, this discourse cannot establish with precision the date when sociological theorization began, we can trace it to the times of Greeks, Romans or even to the Middle Ages.

I begin with the assertion that sociological thoughts were profoundly shaped by their social setting as its basic subject matter. Consequently, the social conditions of nineteenth and twentieth century was significant to the development of sociological thoughts. The French revolution in 1789 and spreading to 19th C. is perceived as the most immediate factor in the rise of sociological theorization. The impact of the revolution was enormous, early sociological thoughts paid attention to the negative consequences that emanated from the evolution especially chaos and disorder. The culmination of industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism that swept through many western societies in 18th and 19th C. lead to large number of people leaving farms and agricultural work for industrial occupations. Other social issues of concern were the rise of socialism, feminism, urbanization, religious changes and growth of science. Equally important were the intellectual forces that led to the rise of sociological theory.

Although, the 18th C. remained central invigorating mixture of political, philosophy, history, political economy and sociology, it's the works of Montesquieu, Ferguson, and Millar that depicts sociological developments as well as historical writers who concentrated on sociological themes within a non sociological discourse such as Plato Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke. The works of Greek thought and the social contract lays the foundation of historian sociology and science of human society. Both Plato and Aristotle were of the view that society as an organism whose constituent parts were related to the whole. In contrast, to Plato who emphasized the unity of the social orgasm, with parts as subordination of the whole, Aristotle was of the view of society as differentiated structure in which separate elements contributed to the whole and remained independent of it. Thus, Plato analysis of the society are hinged on a unified system structured around the division of labour and social inequality and such private property and family functional in harmony to the higher unity of the whole.

For Aristotle, society is founded on human nature. Humanity was by nature social and political making individuals destined to live with others. Although Aristotle social thought mainly remains within the framework of traditional political philosophy, his works is a key piece to sociological thoughts into nature of human society which classifies social phenomena such as government into tyranny, oligarchy democracy which are ideal types. However, there is no clear distinction between the state and society for Plato. Aristotle's static world orientation was unchallenged until 16th C. when social contract theory developed as an alternative which rejected divine law and religious conceptualization of sovereignty. For Hobbes social contract theory, a peaceful and unified civil society was possible through renunciation of certain individual rights through a contractual obligation linked individuals with a sovereign state that would guarantee order and harmony under the rubric of positive law. John Locke views were that the state of nature was rather a state of peace, good will and reciprocal relationships. They therefore both concentrated on secular historical nature of human society and assimilated the notion of social to an underlying aspect of pre-social, trans-historical human nature.

In addition, Jean Jacques Rousseau expanded Locke's dichotomy of sociable humanity existing in a state of nature and the corrupt egoistic humanity of modern civil society. To sum it up, the 18th C. philosophers (Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) developed several sociological themes such as problems of social differentiation inequalities, social conflict and social cohesion, division of labour and private property which are also the sociological problems of contemporary sociological debates. Thus, the pre-eighteenth century philosophy as dominated

by weak concept of social with emphasis on human nature as the basis of human society and social order and lack of conception of society as a complex structure of different levels of economic, political, cultural dependent for their functioning on specific objective laws leading to the argument that the true precursors of sociology are Giambattista Vico and Baronde Montesquieu.

1.2 Vico and Montesquieu

In his book *New Science* Vico offers a vast social thought on comparative analysis of history of human culture in which he delves on issues of religion, development of language, art, literature and the rise of property. He was pre-occupied with making history intelligible by defining it as a process characterized by three distinct stages of development, the age of the God's, the age of Heroes and age of men. His departure was the affirmation of humanistic nature characterized by the creative, active role of human subject. Vico thus discredited the fixed notion of human nature which was the central thesis of social thought by Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke. To Vico society and human nature is dynamic characterized by historical, social institutions and human relationships defined as the product of action.

Subsequently, he was opposed to scientific rationalism associated with natural sciences. It's on this ground that new science rejected assumptions of Newton, Galileo and philosophy of Descartes. The Cartesian rationalism which highly influenced philosophy and science at the time was of the assumption that the only certain knowledge was derived from principles and concepts drawn from mathematics and physics. Vico's revolutionary principle stated that humanity can know only that which itself has created and made and therefore principles of human society are found within modifications of our own human mind.

To Vico, factual knowledge of human external world was inadequate as a basis for humanistic science since it eliminated the active role of human culture, thus diminishing the making in favour of the made. On account of his revolutionary implication his contribution attracted little response among major philosophers and political theorists of 18th C. enlightenment. However in 19th C. his concept of organic whole gained prominence as it opposed the atomistic individualism of French philosophical materialism. This culminated in holistic theorization of society and culture by Comte and Marx and was central to Hegel and Marx human action has meaning only in terms of the whole.

I argue here that although Vico's contributions remained unreceptive, Montesquieu influenced the sociological debates of Scottish school of Ferguson, Smith and Millar. However, Montesquieu was not a specialist but a man of letters in classics and philosophy; he is viewed as the first and greatest sociologist of the enlightenment. In his works *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) he employs a richer and detailed mode of historical analysis and defined society as a structural whole and attempted to locate the specific causes of different social phenomena.

He argues that although society presents itself as chaotic and diverse phenomenon there exists beneath a definite structure comprising regulations of behavior, institutions and law. Thus, social institutions and processes are the product of definite material conditions which can be discovered by empirical and historical analysis. To him, forms of governments were effectively types of societies. Thus, his analysis of law was mirrored in politics for as laws expressed the spirit or

inner essence of society as a whole. Consequently he concludes that the distinction between the political and social is purely formal. I observe that in spite of his contributions are informed by Aristotle's classification of governments, he concentrated on analysis of distribution and exercise of power within them and principles binding them together (virtue, honour and fear). Nonetheless, Montesquieu conceptualization of society as individual as a product of historical change, a passive element within a system conceived as a ceaseless interaction of moral and physical forces that leads to the spirit of a nation. Indeed, Montesquieu's thought of discovering an underlying pattern of relationships between the different elements of society beneath the diversity and chaos of empirical, a structure and system informed Emile Durkheim to regard Montesquieu's thoughts as significant in the development of sociology.

1.3 The Scottish Enlightenment

It is imperative to emphasize that during the second half of 18th C. intellectuals in Glasgow and Edinburgh looked at scientific study of human societies in the direction opposed to social contract theory (David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Millar and William Robertson). The Scottish enlightenment that concentrated on society as a distinctive object of study that could not be assimilated to a contractual relation between individuals and government but rather defined empirically as a distinctive structure with a natural or theoretical history. On this account, Smith, Ferguson and Millar raised central sociological issues and problems as those advanced by 18th C. philosophers such as Hobbes Locke Rousseau.

However, Hume was empirist, who argued that experience, fact; utility constituted the backbone of epistemology and social philosophy and thus rejected the notion of social contract. It ignored the real historical world of human experience and facts. He further, emphasized on the role of social factors which affects human character (mutual dependence of man). However he failed to develop a conception of society as a structure and remained atomistic using a deductive approach. Rather, his concern remained with the forms of sociability which human nature assumes in the society. Interestingly, Hume's writings coalesced around proto-sociological themes (Authority, property and power).

Evidently, the significance of Scottish enlightenment to the making of sociology was the clear distinction that society constituted a process the product of specific economic, social and historical forces that could be identified and analyzed through the method of empirical science. Thus society was classified a category of historical investigations the result of objective and material causes.

On the other hand, Smith contends that the development of a commercial society produced a social structure divided into three clear classes, landowners, capitalists and labourers. The relation between Smith's three social orders and economic elements was unambiguous forming the basis of social differentiation. In pre-industrial society Millar's social stratification was largely based on function and commercial society produced damaging effects through the division of labour. However, contrasting Millar and Ferguson, on relationship between social stratification and division of labour both treated the relationship sociologically. This resulted in sociological break from the works of Montesquieu and Hume which failed to grasp its broad structural significance.

In addition, Ferguson and Millar identified industrial change as a source of a progress in human resulted in inevitable dehumanization and alienation thus social development was contradictory. This occurred through economic forces and combined efforts of groups and generations. Further, they elaborate that, social change was conceived as a collective and not an individual phenomenon involving physical situation, economic and political organization and the division of labour. Vico's voluntarism is mirrored by Ferguson and Millar's work but the dualism in the concept of an active agent and determining environment was never adequately addressed while Smith's wealth of nations private and egoistic interests and viewed as collective social good of an invisible hand which advances the interests of the society.

In summary, the atomistic individualism of post – Montesquieu French enlightenment did not realize development of fundamental sociological concept of society but Vico, Montesquieu and Ferguson had laid the foundations and posed the essential problems of science of human society, culture and historical change. Although the historical genesis of sociology began with the work of Saint Simon, Comte and the positivist tradition. We trace the relationship of the enlightenment and development of sociology to the assertion of humanism and philosophical emphasis on reason, freedom and individualism which had three broad streams of thought first, the humanist historicism of Vico, second, the mechanistic social theory of Montesquieu, Millar and Ferguson and thirdly the philosophers Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau whose critical rationalism was dedicated to understanding the social world.

1.4 Positivism and Counter-positivism

Accordingly, positivism formed integral part of the enlightenment and dates from early 19th C in the works of Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). Empiricism assumed the existence of an external world through the senses. Knowledge was thus defined as a social product useful and functional, secular and innovating. Knowledge equally developed from principles derived from mathematical and logic. Positivism therefore developed a concept of society while empiricism a theory of concepts.

In addition, the French revolution had effect of challenging the rationalism assumptions and judged enlightenment philosophy as deficient in analysis of traditional institutions. The three influential critics of philosophical rationalism (Edmund Burke, Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre) denounced the individualistic concept of society developed by enlightenment philosophers. Society was defined as an organic whole in which irrational and traditional elements played an active constitutive role. Thus, revolution and industrialism created a new kind of society where old traditional values no longer held sway.

Bonald and Maistre held the view that society does not consist in aggregate of individuals. They therefore “mourned” the passing of the traditional legitimacy of old society and questioned the new modes of political obligations. Thus, they emphasized on the nature of social bond but in the development of sociological positivism the irrational and negative view of science advocated by these philosophers rejected.

Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857) founded the first comprehensive system of sociology which was strongly influenced by the work of Saint – Simon. He attempted to reconcile the anti-atomistic

theories of Bonald and Maistre with rationalist concept of progress and notion of predictability of man. Comte's attitude to the enlightenment was negative. In particular he rejected the enlightenment view that pre-industrial society especially the middle ages. Sociology was defined in its relations with other sciences a task that is facilitated by the law of three states. He argued all human thought has passed through three separate stages, the theoretical (super natural) divided into fetishism, polytheism and monotheism, the metaphysical (abstract concepts) and positive stage (observation and experiments). To him, the distinctive matter of sociology was thus society as a whole, which is defined as a social system. Comte's awareness that facts and theory are mutually connected suggests that sociology is an interpretive science. To this end he observed that the aftermath of the French revolution created a spiritual vacuum and absence of any moral discipline.

He suggested that the solution to problem of division of labour was institution of "wise government" with its principles fundamentally religious and universal. However he failed to develop the notion of society as an empirical and historical totality, nevertheless, he laid the foundations of a sociological positivism which remained the dominant paradigm during the course of 19th C. Unlike Comte, Mills believed in importance of ethnology as the science of laws of human nature. He argued that social sciences consisted of the empirical laws of sociology, demonstrated in statistical studies and surveys, the laws of psychology and finally linking the sociology and psychology.

Owing to shortcomings of Mills positivistic nominalism, Herbert Spencer combined model of social development under society as system and as aggregate of individuals. To this end, Spencer's key focus was on evolutionary growth of social structures and institutions. He also borrowed from Lamarck's theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics. This society was defined by Spencer as gradual socialization of humanity, a process occurring independently of human practice. Thus he notes militant and industrial societies in terms of this holistic approach. However he failed to integrate the dialectical elements of social change that evolution creates both differentiation of structure and differentiation of interest thus making parts to become independent through collective social organization and development of a common awareness by the members of different specialized organizations and their interests differed from the interest of others.

1.6 Conclusion

Evidently, from the preceding discussion the 18th and 19th C. philosophy illuminated on contemporary central problems of sociological thought. However, the historical and philosophical writers dealt with sociological themes within a non sociological discourse. It posits to claim that during this period, there was no distinctive sociological framework or perspective but rather core sociological concepts and an empirical attempt on methodology subsisting within philosophical, economical, political and historical perspectives.

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