UNIT 2 PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Contents

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, the students would be able to comprehend the:

➤ emergence of the historical and philosophical development of the subject of social anthropology;

➤ early and classical evolutionists views on the study of human evolution; and

➤ primitive as a concept.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall introduce the students to the philosophical roots of the subject of anthropology, especially social anthropology, and show how every form of knowledge can be contextualised into a historical condition. Human thinking does not grow in a vacuum but is triggered by the intellectual climate, the cultural heritage and historical circumstances that make possible a way of thinking as well as its condition's acceptable. It is seen that some ideas may come that are premature for their times and therefore face rejection or even persecution, like the classic case of Galileo.

2.2 THE BEGINNINGS OF THE POSSIBILITY OF A SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SOCIETY

Society, for a long period of time, was not considered to be an object of study, simply because it was taken for granted that society and human beings in it were God's or a Divine creation and the only explanations of the origin of the world and the people and other existing animate and inanimate things was to be found in religion and mythology. It was indeed a great transformation in intellectual thinking when some 16th and 17th century European scholars began to think about society as a human and not a divine creation. By this century in the West, the intellectual climate

was moving towards a break away from the Church and its controlling ritualism towards a greater faith in the human capacity for rational thinking. The human mind was seen as a superior endowment that privileged human beings above all others and could dominate over nature and also over women who in this frame of reference were equated with nature. Society was seen as a creation not of nature or of God but of humans as creatures of reason and society was now opposed to a state of nature and the foundation was laid for a nature, culture opposition that had far reaching ramifications for later theory.

It was with the philosophical thinking of scholars such as David Hume, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau that the scholarly thinking began to debate upon the human origins of the kind of society in which the then Europeans lived. Society became a self imposed discipline to which human beings subjected themselves in order to escape a state of anarchy. Some like Rousseau romanticised on a blissful state of nature from which humans had entered into a state of slavery to customs, while others like Hobbes viewed a state of nature as savage and the state of society as harmonious and desirable. It was at this point that individuals were seen as opposed to society or the collectivity and a tension between the two became a point of concern of western views about society.

By the seventeenth century onwards the Europeans had been thrown into close contact with the non-European world through colonisation, conquest and trade, at the same time there were genuine thinking about a unified vision of humanity that encompassed even those most remote from the western civilisation. Scholars were now faced not only with the task of explaining human social origins but also social diversity.

2.2.1 Montesquieu and Social Diversity

The French philosopher Montesquieu has often been regarded as the first to have a systematic theory about society as described in his work *The Spirit of the Laws*. In true spirit of having a science of society, he worked on the basic premise that the seemingly endless diversity is reducible to coherence by looking for some underlying principle of causation. In other words, if we can find out what causes diversity, we have a classification and explanation of varieties of social formations. A second premise was again based upon that of finding a scientific explanation, namely of creating a typology of societies. Thus two fundamental processes of a scientific explanation, namely, to establish causal relationships and to arrange diversity into a typology in order to gain insight, were applied by Montesquieu to the study of society. Firstly he divided societies into three types of governments; republic, monarchy and despotism. Secondly he tried to establish some causative factors for the development of each of these types. A republic was where the government was vested in either a part of a society (aristocracy) or in all the people (democracy); while in both monarchy and despotism it was vested in an individual the difference being that the monarchy is run on principles and law (Montesquieu had the British monarchy as an example in front of him) and despotism follows no such rules. To Montesquieu, each form of government was not just a political principle but was a particular kind of society which was also founded upon a particular type of basic sentiment. We can compare the concept of sentiment with what much later Ruth Benedict had called ethos, in describing different types of cultures (Benedict, 1934). Thus the predominant kind of sentiment in case of a republic was virtue in the sense of what today we would call ethics, adherence to laws and a sense of collective order, in case of monarchy, it was honour again this was in reference to rank and

status and was primarily of the person in power, and that of despotism was that of primal emotion of fear, of the people for the person in power. Thus the sentiments are not seen as evenly distributed but refer to the main guiding principle of that particular type of society.

The real sociological dimension of Montesquieu's analysis lies in his attempts to impute causes to the types of societies which unlike Comte, he did not put in any evolutionary framework. To him the causative factors were both geographical, like climate and nature of the soil and social in terms of trade, its historical transformations and currency. While his analysis contains some traces of economic determinism in his emphasis on the economic factors over others, he did not impute any progressive scale to the societies. In his opinion, despotism, the most evil of the three could well be the fate of most societies as monarchies had a tendency to transform into despotism, especially when the size became too large. At the same time he referred to the British parliament as a combination of democracy and aristocracy represented by the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The moderate nature of government, that is one that was not oppressive like despotism was possible through a balance of power and like most people of his time he had no concept of equality, only a benign balance of power or rule by principles by those in power. To some extent, however, he does give primacy to sentiments over physical conditions and makes some judgment about the moral and ethical qualities of different principles of government. Thus we find in Montessquieu a sociological analysis that makes use of causative factors underlying various types of societies and an attempt to understand social formation, both in terms of creating a typology of societies independent of any particular spatial or temporal distribution.

Social philosophers were also beginning to think in terms of social transformation as the French Revolution brought about the first major social transformation of the mid eighteenth century, setting the stage for rethinking on society, not as static but as an entity that was likely to have changed over time. It was in this historical setting that August Comte gave his theory of social evolution.

2.2.2 Comte and a Positivist View of Society

The French Revolution and the beginnings of industrialisation in Europe gave a different perspective to the social philosophy of Auguste Comte who concentrated upon transformation of society from one type to another rather than upon the co-existence of a diversity of social types, like Montesquieu. As Comte saw it, the society based on military power and religion was being replaced by one based on science and industry. Thus instead of looking at a horisontal diversity, he looked upon a vertical transformation. Hence, to him science or rational study of society would be one in which one would be able to explain how society is transforming. Thus to an intellectual analysis of society, he gave the nomenclature, sociology and to the method of analysis, the term positivism.

Comte distinguished between an analytic and a synthetic analysis; an analytic method can be applied only in material sciences where any two things can be linked without consideration to context, but in social analysis context is essential or in other words, he applied the organic analogy where no part has existence outside of the whole. Therefore, social phenomenon can only be understood in context of the associated aspects including history. Thus while material phenomenon can be understood as elements, society only exists as an entity. This was the beginning of an organic analogy and the holistic method later taken up by the structural functionalists. But

Comte's more immediate application was that of the postulation of a stage by stage theory of progress that was the basis of classical evolutionary theories.

To Comte all of human society is only one entity, and differences are only at various levels of progress exhibited by them. The level at which European society was existing (or rather making a transition) was preceded by earlier stages. Comte's stage by stage theory of progress was of the Theological, Metaphysical and the Age of Reason. The positivist method of observation, experimentation and analysis that signified the western scientific approach was possible only in the last stage of human progress. To Comte nothing was achievable by human agency and that historical events took their own course, thus a revolution was not a human achievement but part of an inevitable course of events, subject to natural laws. In this way sociology for him was the laws of historical development.

When humans had imperfect understanding of their environment, they worshipped anthropomorphic beings, alter the objects of worship became more abstract or metaphysical like in higher religions, but finally humans attained a reasoned understanding of their environment in the form of science and society was moving towards industrialisation and emphasis upon economy and trade rather than war. However the most industrialised societies of the world have always shown themselves to be more prone to warfare and science never did replace religion as a central concern of human beings. But to Comte we do owe a systematic study of society to be called as sociology although in terms of the comparative method, it was Montesquieu, who led the way.

To mention Comte one must not forget to mention his mentor and teacher Saint-Simon, who according to Durkheim was the real father of positivism. Saint-Simon believed that society or institutions were only epiphenomenon of ideas and that behind every coherent society there was a body of coherent ideas. As an idealist he supported the French Revolution and also fought in the American war of independence. To him the French revolution was the result of a break down in the coherence of theological ideas and the monarchy; and that monarchy needed to be replaced by industry by which he meant any kind of honest work. In his view of social transformation, organic or stable periods were marked by a breakdown of existing social relationships and the forging of new ones.

However not all thinkers were of the opinion that western societies were superior in all respects; Hume for example was convinced that polytheism gave rise to a sense of greater tolerance and gave more freedom to human thought than monotheism that was too restrictive, Rousseau also believed the civilisations to be too controlling of human freedom of both thought and action. But while Comte talked of progress, he did not mention evolution as a concept that was first formulated by Herbert Spencer, although later established by Charles Darwin.

2.3   THE STUDY OF HUMAN EVOLUTION

The concept of evolution was formally established by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) the author of the book *Progress: Its' Laws and Causes* published in 1857. Spencer believed that evolution was a feature of all phenomena; organic, inorganic or super organic. He, like other evolutionists to follow, believed that evolution goes through uniform stages always towards progress that he defined in terms of greater differentiation as well as integration, in other words greater complexity. Spencer believed that those of superior ability have greater advantage in survival, an idea expressed in the cliché "survival of the fittest", variously misused over the period

following him. He foreshadowed the concept of structure and function looking upon societies as some kind of self regulating systems, where human agency had limited role to play while the constituent parts were interdependent. In this sense of viewing society as having its own inner logic, he was against too much of external interference in regulating social affairs. He was thus against any kind of state welfare programs, looking upon the poor and marginal as weeds that would eliminate themselves.

Spencer believed that as society evolved human beings would learn to live together by consensus rather than by coercion, in other words a civic society based on mutual consideration would evolve. In this sense also he contributed to the western bias of seeing so called primitive societies as based upon a mechanical solidarity and advanced forms of society as based upon organic solidarity. War and conquest were also seen by him to be a part of progress or to establish the domination of the superior to bring about more complex forms.

The term evolution was first used in seventeenth century Europe to designate a process of unfolding in a sense that the outcome is already contained within the entity, in other words there is a sense of inevitability. Comte also used it to designate progress and inevitability of transformation. But a science of society based on evolutionary principles can definitely be attributed to Spencer alone.

Darwin's theory of evolution was more correctly to be understood as descent with modification, an empirical work based on factual data and lacking sweeping generalisation of Spencer.

A major contributor to the idea of evolution was Herder who further refined the concept of progress into development, and gave a definite shape to each level of development as a stage. Evolutionism can be understood as a nomothetic or generalised mode of explanation that can also be called a grand or meta theory. It makes use of the comparative method borrowed from biology and philology. Apart from Spencer, some of the early social evolutionists whose works influenced anthropological theory immensely were McLennan (1827-81), Bachofen (1815-87) and Maine (1822-88)

2.3.1 The Early Evolutionists

None of these authors were anthropologists as they predate the establishment of anthropology as a separate discipline. All three were lawyers whose subject matter of dealing with human society gave them an incentive to study the development of society and to make generalisations basing themselves on earlier scholarly inputs.

J.J. Bachofen was greatly influenced by the works of Carl von Savigny interested in symbolism of grave paintings where he identified the recurrent themes such as the black and white eggs that he interprets as feminine and interprets the feminine as the passive recipient of discourse between men, who are shown as standing and talking presumably about the egg. However, Bachofen's major contribution lies in advocating for mother right as a predecessor of father right, or patriarchy. In other words he associates the rule of women as more primitive state than the rule of men, which appears to him as definitely more like civilisation. According to Bachofen social relationships arise in response to the need or establishment of social order contained in the basic needs of child rearing, sexual access and social authority; thus the first stage is anarchy or no order, then comes one based on rule by women that is finally replaced by the rule by men. He took the example of three fictitious societies to illustrate the prevalence of mother right in his work *Das Muttterrecht,* 1861, as he neither had access to any first hand data nor were there any ethnographic examples of matriarchal societies.

His view of the early stages of human society was that they were close to nature and materialistic. In some ways his views reflect the general conceptualisation of the primitive societies as based on instinct rather than reason, as lacking higher spirituality and crude in their mental makeup; in this sense the transition from mother right to patriarchy is also synonymous with ethical and moral upliftment.

The reasons for transformation of societies reflect both a Hegelian dialectics and Montequieu's contextualisation, thus each system produces contradictions leading to reactions. The fundamental change is in the way people think about good and bad or the right and the wrong; once these change all aspects of society change. He believed in the power of ideas to change society. To a very large extent he was Eurocentric in that in his opinion the conquest of the East by the West was a major step towards higher civilisation and embodied the victory of non-material over material, reason over feeling and maleness over femaleness. Thus he follows the western philosophy of equating the feminine with passivity, instinct, nature and the base qualities of life while masculinity is equated with, reason, culture and the higher qualities of life. He gave his idea about masculine and feminine in the broad universal categorisation of everything in the universe in his matriarchal mosaic and patriarchal mosaic. To him these were two different cultural types albeit hierarchical.

Henry Maine too was a lawyer whose major work *Ancient Law* was published in 1861. He derived his intellectual inspiration from Montesquieu, Jeremy Bentham and John Austin. He linked the laws of people with their social heritage and rejected the idea of laws of society being homologous to laws of nature or in other words the possibility of having universal laws. According to Maine there are three fundamental aspects of any law, its origin in a command, an obligation imposed by the command and a sanction to enforce the obligation. These aspects are derived from the works of John Austin and Jeremy Bentham. However he did not accept Jeremy Bentham's main thesis of utility that each individual should get from society what they contribute to it. The Benthamite principle takes as the main fundamental unit of law, the individual whereas most non-western systems see the individual as embedded in social relationships. There can also be a debate as to the assessment of utility, how does one define or find any universal standard for it. However, Maine's work was based on the detailed study of ancient legal systems, notably that of ancient Rome, Islamic law and the Brahmanical laws as encoded by Manu. In this way Maine focused upon higher civilisations and came up with the proposition that patriarchy was the first form of the family. In this way he opposes both Bachofen and McLennan, who were for the model of evolution of human societies from matriarchy/matriliny to patriarchy/patriliny.

His main contribution lies in putting forward the thesis that societies evolve from status to contract, in other words from a stage where social personhood is defined by a person's social relationships or ascriptive status to one where social personhood is determined by rational legal characters.

Reflection

Maine traces the origin of family to the 'Patrias Potestas' of the ancient Romans, tracing the evolutionary stages from the male headed household with wives, children including adopted ones and slaves to the power of the king and oligarchies, then nobility and then industrial societies where instead of kinship, contractual relationships become important.

Maine's sequence is not speculative but based on data from historical societies. Since he was not aware of the actual depth of human civilisation his data began from the early stages of European society only. However he had served as an administrator

in India and was for sometime the vice-chancellor of Calcutta University. It was because of his intervention that the Indian legal system was debated upon taking cognisance of the ancient Hindu codes and other civil codes existing in India, rather than replacing it totally by the British system as was done by the Permanent Settlement of Bengal of 1793. Maine rightly believed that a legal system cannot be transplanted onto an alien society as each legal system reflects a specific kind of society. Legislation and jurisprudence was not the only expression of a legality as supposed by Bentham and others but only the final stage of a historical development of law beginning from the divine laws of ancient times to its codification as at the time of Hammurabi and then to modern law expressed by the British legal system based on contract.

McLennan too was a lawyer who reflected upon the evolution of human marriage and society. His book *Primitive Marriage* written in 1865 had great influence and made the notion of matriarchy as the early stage of human evolution popular as directly opposed to Maine's theory of Patriarchy. McLennan followed a speculative theory where he presumed a so called primitive stage where there was no regulation sexual activity; female infanticide was rampant that led to a situation of scarcity of women that would cause men to enter into conflict over scarce women. To mitigate the situation of conflict each group would exchange its women with other groups in a peaceful negotiation leading to the practice of exogamy that would also establish the notion of clans as a group that would not marry its own women. However even exogamy would not solve the problem of shortage of women giving rise to the practice of polyandry. Eventually with fraternal polyandry some notion of fatherhood would come up. In the initial stages however only the biological fact of motherhood would serve to distinguish a set of children as siblings and descended from a common mother, therefore the notion of matriliny would be an obvious precursor of patriliny. The establishment of fatherhood as a part of kinship relationships could only come much later when fraternal polyandry would give way to levirate.

While Maine had given the sequence of social evolution as family-gen-tribe-state; McLennan gave the opposite sequence of tribe-gen-family. Thus the tribe was a stage of undifferentiated promiscuity where only motherhood was recognised, followed by gens that recognise siblings and finally family that recognises the father and mother as the parents of a set of siblings. Morgan agreed with McLennan giving the additional evidence in the form of kinship terminology. He said that kinship terminologies were survivals of earlier forms of marriage, thus the generational or Hawaiian kinship that has only generation and sex specific kin terms actually represents a stage of promiscuity where one could only recognise generations and sex and no other kin relationship.

However the counter argument came from Charles Darwin himself, who criticised the concept of primitive promiscuity as proposed by McLennan saying that sexual jealously was an innate emotion and humans must have had ordered mating patterns from an early stage. Moreover there was no evidence of promiscuity from any known human society, past or present. Later Westermarck in his monumental work on the *History of Human Marriage* once and for all laid to rest the debate about promiscuity as well as matriarchy. In fact it was Westermarck's criticism that discredited Morgan and for a long time he was not taken seriously.

However, Morgan along with Edward B Tylor can be called as the founders of the discipline of anthropology as the subject is known today.

2.3.2 Classical Evolutionism

Charles Darwin's work had established the Monogenistic School that believed that all humans have the same origin and thus there is no racial difference in human

development. Given that all humans have the same potential the problem in front of the nineteenth century European scholars was to explain the varieties of cultures found all over the world and the fact that the Europeans were also experiencing transformations that made it clear that their society had also evolved from an earlier stage where things were not the same as they were then. Anthropology as a discipline was established to study two primary issues facing the civilised men of nineteenth century Europe, the facts of human evolution and variation, both in terms of culture and in terms of physical differences. Since humans were now known to have evolved from pre-human stages paleo-anthropology and archaeology were added to study the physiological and cultural evolution of humans to the Homo Sapiens stage.

Tylor, who held the first officially designated chair of anthropology, explained human cultural variations as stages of development of the same culture, what Ingold (1986) has called culture with a capital C. Thus there was but only one human Culture and all the differences that one could see across the globe were different stages of it. Tylor evoked the notion of psychic unity of mankind to determine the origin of an overtly human institution like religion by using what Evans-Pritchard has called the "If I were a horse hypothesis?" Thus Tylor put himself in the place of an early human to speculate what that person must have thought in the face of life's most mystical aspects, namely death and dreams. From this speculation Tylor derived the origin of religion as Animism or belief in a soul.

Tylor along with Lubbock described human evolution in terms of stages of evolution with an inbuilt notion of progress. Thus, Lubbock in 1871 published the book *Origin of Civilisation* where he identified the archeological stages of stone, copper and iron age with the stages of economic progress, namely savagery (hunting and food gathering) barbarism (nomadism and pastoralism) and then agriculture and then industrial civilisation. Tylor likewise in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871), identified three stages of progress of human Culture, savagery, barbarism and civilisation; the transition from the first to second marked by the advent of agriculture and from second to third by the invention of writing. Tylor used the concept of 'survivals' to substantiate his theory of evolution.

Lewis Henry Morgan was influenced by both Tylor and Lubbock and borrowed from them to write his *Ancient Society* (1877). He used the concept of Ethnical Periods, dividing each into three stages thereby converting the three stage developmental scheme into a more detailed and elaborate scheme of seven distinct ethnical periods. According to Morgan original ideas only occur once in human society and they are like germs that develop on their own into stages that are predetermined. He identified four main ideas, namely idea of government, idea of property, idea of family and idea of subsistence or technology. Each of these follows its own line of growth and each ethnical period is marked by successive stages of growth of these ideas.

2.4 THE PRIMITIVE AS A CONCEPT

Both sociology and social anthropology were made possible by a paradigm shift from a divine origin of human society to a conceptualisation of society as an outcome of human agency. The major transformations taking place in European society marked by the French Revolution and the transition to a industrialised society based on trade and commerce rather than war and conquest gave rise to the expectation that societies transform and therefore there must have been a past to the European society as it was existing in the eighteenth to nineteenth century. Much of sociological thinking was

directed towards understanding one's own past and in this attempt scholars like Comte, Spencer, Lubbock and others formulated an evolutionary schema of social development, always keeping the European societies at the apex. The influence of Lamarck is seen in the postulation of a stage by stage rather than a gradual evolution. And to Darwin we owe the consolidation of the entire human species as one supported by the theory of monogenesis and psychic unity of mankind. The idea of monogenesis and unity of the human race was also supported by the universal presence of family and marriage in the form of regulated mating and a universal acceptance of incest taboos and religion as a belief in the supernatural and mystical.

By the nineteenth century all theories of savages with no sense of kinship or morality was replaced by a universal humanism, only that it expressed itself in many different forms. Thus the question was no longer whether non-western societies have a religion or forms of marriage but why are the manifestations of these universal human institutions so varied in different parts of the world. The problem was not just to explain human evolution but human variation as well.

Tylor, found a solution in transforming spatial difference into temporal ones. In other words he put forward the thesis that those who were different were so because they were at different stages of Culture that was universal for all humans. To substantiate his arguments he made use of the comparative method borrowed from biology to put on a fictitious time scale all or most human cultures about which knowledge was obtained through various sources. Thus living populations were seen as the past of the European societies. The term primitive came to denote not people who were actually living in the past, but who were living as primitives in the contemporary world. The implications were far reaching, especially as it informed the notion of development as it is still understood, long after the demise of classical evolutionary theories. Many societies of the world were and are still judged as primitive meaning almost always that they do not fulfill the criteria of civilisation as embodied in western societies and those which are following the western model. To a large extent the branding of some cultures as lower stages of a common human culture gave a justification to European colonisation as it was presented not as an exploitative project but a reformative one.

2.5   SUMMARY

In summing up the unit we can say that the beginnings of positivism and the scientific study of society made social anthropology possible as a scientific study of human social and cultural variations. The nineteenth century was marked by a preoccupation with human evolution and the social scientists followed Lamarck in positing a stage by stage schema of evolution. The classical evolutionists were all unilineal influenced by the monogenesis theory of Darwin and the hypothesis of a psychic unity of mankind. The institutions of kinship, marriage and religion were of prime concern as universal traits of a common humanism. The methodology made use of the comparative method borrowed from biology. While sociology was a discipline that looked only into the evolution of European society, anthropology focused on entire mankind and in all aspects of being human, cultural, physical and species evolution.

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Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

1) Describe the intellectual basis for the emergence of a science of society.

2) Discuss Montesquieu's contribution towards a sociological understanding of social variation.

3) What is positivism? Discuss Comte's contribution towards this theory.

4) Compare the approach of Comte and Montequieu critically.

5) What was Darwin's influence on the formation of a theory of social evolution?