

# **Problems in Methodology: Western Views on History and Sociology<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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## **Résumé**

L'article présente un simple résumé des difficultés relatives à la recherche de la connaissance en sciences sociales parmi les Européens, qui contrairement en sciences dites exactes ou expérimentales, ont essayé de déterminer la relation entre l'unique et le général, entre l'objectivité et subjectivité en histoire, aboutissant ainsi au développement des différentes écoles de pensée en sociologie et des méthodes de recherche.

## **Introduction**

Man has always been looking for some kind of truth in this world; he has gradually conceived ways how to seek knowledge from the working and structure of his material and social environment. Such ways or methods could only but express man's limited capabilities for establishing universal theoretical framework or laws. Before and after both the English Industrial Revolution and the French political

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at a Study Day at the University of Adrar, Department of English, 2011

revolution, European intellectuals<sup>2</sup> tried to elaborate some valid methods for confirming partly the existence of some social laws as in natural sciences, however with little success. This paper attempts to introduce some historical and sociological approaches to the study of society and the difficulties for ascertaining their validity in the social milieu.

Basically, any human society comprises human and material resources out of which particular activities become a reality. Agricultural resources generate the activity of farming; mineral resources lead to the emergence of mining activities and sea animal resources result in fishing enterprise. Evidently, such activities, which are vital for human survival, involve the invention of the means of production, a kind of a working organization for common purposes under the control of some authority. Search for individual or common interest and power contributed to gradual change in society and consequently to the acquisition of more knowledge as regards its basic constant and variable characteristics.

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<sup>2</sup> It is a simple introduction to only Europeans' attempt at studying society; it does not intentionally exclude the existence of other scientists such as Ibn Khaldoun whose theory of history expounded in his *Muquadimma*, anticipates theories of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European social scientists.

## 1. History

The predominance of philosophical thought before the 19<sup>th</sup> century affected methodology related to observation and reflection upon those social characteristics in a way that search for some truth relied on theological explanations or even metaphysical assumptions. With some religious and political freedom, there had been some questioning as to the explanations and arguments provided for the understanding of the social organisation and process.

And since any understanding required evidence or historical fact, historians considered the latter as a basis for describing and analysing society. The Positivists, believing in the cult of facts, wanted to ascertain them and draw conclusion from them. This view of history fitted in with empiricist tradition of Locke. Nineteenth century interest in history reveals the sacredness of the historical fact, the corpus of ascertained facts available in documents and inscriptions etc.

But philosophical historians initiated the distinction between the 'State' and 'civil society'. For Ferguson (1761), society should be examined as a system of interrelated institutions and should be classified into different types at different stages of development<sup>3</sup>. Hegel and St Simon were influential writers in this school of thought. Society had to be

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<sup>3</sup> Fergusson, A; *Essay on the History of Civil Society* 1761, quoted in Bottomore, T, Sociology, George Allen, 1962, p 17

conceived as something more than a political society but a range of social institutions. However, some observations were made as to the selection of the fact and its accuracy by the historian, which led to inquire into the method used by the historian and its validity.

Historians generally rely on "auxiliary sciences" such as archaeology, numismatics, chronology etc, for the selection of their historical facts. Such selection or establishment of such facts rests primarily on a prior decision of the historian, so, how could a mere fact about the past be transformed into a fact of history? And how could it exist objectively and independently of

The historian's interpretation? The problem rests on the relationship between evaluative standpoints or normative judgments and empirical knowledge.

As far as methodology is concerned, interpretation becomes an essential element in historical studies, for granting a fact the status as a historical one depends on the historian's ability for interpretation and selection. This logically reduced the objectivity of the selection because history became according to Barraclough (1957) ' a series of accepted judgments'<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the historian had to discover the *significant* facts and turn them into facts of history on one hand, but on the other he would have to discard the insignificant facts as unhistorical.

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<sup>4</sup> Barraclough, *History in a Changing World*, (1955), quoted in E. H. Carr, What is History, Pelican, 1961, p 14.

Consequently, historical judgments involve persons and points of view, and may distort objective historical truth. Weber argues that value judgments are 'practical evaluations of the unsatisfactory and satisfactory character of phenomena subject to our influence. They can be deduced from ethical principles, cultural ideals or a philosophical outlook'<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, Dilthey and Croce, a German liberal philosopher and Italian historian respectively, rejected the cult of the fact, its primacy or autonomy because the study of the past fact can only be through the eyes of the present. They argued that selection of what is worth recording in history is intimately related to evaluation, which is, in turn, inherent to the historian<sup>6</sup>. In other terms, the reconstruction of the past presents a few problems. First, reconstruction in the historian's mind depends on historical evidence, which is refracted through the mind of the recorder. Second, interpretation relies on the historian's imaginative understanding through the language he is familiar with. Third, in some cases, there is interference with nostalgic romanticism which may affect selection of historical facts.

The historian is seen in a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. This involves an interaction between the particular and the

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<sup>5</sup> Weber, M, *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, 1949, p.1

<sup>6</sup> E.H, Carr, op. cit, p. 21

general, the empirical and theoretical, and objective and subjective, for historical situations are considered as unique: there are no two identical historical contexts; though the two world wars are wars, they do not present the same characteristics, each one is unique.

The focus on the unique resulted from the cult of 'individualism' starting with the Renaissance, though a social process cannot be explained only in terms of individuals. The latter cannot act in a vacuum but in a social context, and under the impulse of a past society.

## **2. Sociology**

Various methods had been formulated as to the understanding of 'social action', and social scientists had been influenced by those adopted in natural sciences with a view to establishing precise and comprehensive social laws. In fact, some regarded society as a biological entity and tried to explain its stages of evolution based on the biological theory advanced by Darwin. Others, Spencer (1851) in particular, adhered to the Newtonian explanation that society like the world of nature was thought of a mechanism, B. Russell advanced that human behaviour should be examined in terms of mathematical relations. Focus or source for methodological enquiry shifted from one discipline to another along the evolution of knowledge. Adam Smith, Malthus referred to the law of population and economic growth respectively; Marx

stressed the choice for economic laws as a basis for historical materialism; to him political institutions and human behaviour are closely related with the economic system and social classes<sup>7</sup>, but Weber rejected all of these evolutionary, mechanistic, organicist and materialist approaches, arguing that the focus should be on the '*interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences*'<sup>8</sup>.

Since it is not possible to interpret the social actions of individuals exclusively on the basis on the introspective knowledge of the historian nor is it evident to formulate social laws from a theoretical model similar to natural sciences, social scientists had to devise appropriate schemes of explanation and appropriate methods of enquiry. For Gurvitch, social laws can be changed by man whereas natural ones cannot. Man can create '*new correlations of social variables which function as antecedent conditions from which new consequences follow*'<sup>9</sup>. Bottomore concluded after examining the evolution of social sciences that the problem is connected with methodology rather than theory.

Early social scientists investigated and explained major social phenomena by associating their method to those of other sciences, but in the early twentieth century and in the

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<sup>7</sup> for further details, Guy Rocher, *Introduction à la sociologie générale*, Vol. 2 *L'Organisation sociale*, Edition HMH, 1968

<sup>8</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, 1978, p 4

<sup>9</sup> Bottomore, T, op cit, p34.

1940s and 1950s a new trend of sociologists departed from those methods and tried to establish techniques of sociological enquiry though they resorted to historical explanations of social development. A number of schools had been established with their own methods or approach to society. These included the historical school, the comparative method, the functionalist, the systematic and the structuralist ones.

The *historical approach* focuses on the problems of the origins, development and transformation of social institutions, societies, and civilizations. Sociologists were concerned mainly with evolutionary schemes. The *comparative method*, rejected partly the evolutionary approach, and searched for the establishment of causal connections. Its methods aimed at distinguishing different types of economic system and examining variations in the institutions of government and social stratification, and the correlation with the economic differences<sup>10</sup>. The *functionalist approach* emerged as a reaction to the methods of both the evolutionist and comparative trends and formulated a concept of 'social function' already initiated by Durkheim, Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski. According to the latter, every social activity has a function by a virtue of its existence, and every activity was so completely integrated with all the others that no single phenomenon was intelligible outside the whole context. The *systematic approach* is considered as a reaction to the

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<sup>10</sup> . ibid, p.55



evolutionary approach, and considered the forms of sociation or interaction as distinguished from the historical context.<sup>11</sup> .

G. Simmel, the originator of this approach believed that the interaction was not confined exclusively to the major political or economic institutions, but could be traced in the minor and fleeting relationships between individuals reducing thus relationships to psychological factors. The *structuralist approach*, a 20<sup>th</sup> century creation under Claude Lévi-Strauss, looks for universal elements in human society despite the varieties of social structure<sup>12</sup> .

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<sup>11</sup> . ibid, p.66

<sup>12</sup> . for further explanation, Levi-Strauss, *L'Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1958.

## **Conclusion**

Though the different schools have tried to define the most objective scientific and invariable method for the study of the human society, they have been facing the complexity of interrelatedness of social actions and human continuous creativity.

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