Unit 1
Social Theory and its Context

Contents

Learning objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to

▢   describe the context of social theory

▢   discuss the role of Comte, Marx Weber, and Durkheim

▢   describe some early British social theorists

▢   assess the role of context in the rise of social theory.

1.1   Introduction

Sociological theories are embedded in a particular social context, and are deeply influenced by them. Each sociological thinker or theorist has to respond to the social situation in which he or she exists and to try and make sense of the enveloping culture. That is to say that sociological theory is the sociologist's response to the context in which he lives and works. This truism will become increasingly apparent as you study the unit. However, it needs to be pointed out that there is an inner context and an outer context. The interplay between these two interrelated arenas of living creates sociological theory. The inner context is the background and mind-set of the theorist and also the strong influences and ideas that motivate a thinker to become a social theorist. The outer context is the overall environment, social and physical that the society is embedded in. However this is not to say that similar contexts cannot or do not produce competing theories. Social Theory and its Development thus take place in a particular social and psychological setting. We now give a description of the overall social context in which sociological theory developed. As is well known sociology developed first in the west and it was in the 20th century that it percolated to India.

The French Revolution in 1789 created such an urgent context that it became an important element to create a need for sociological theorising. Thus the French Revolution gave rise to many changes in that society. These changes were beneficial in the main but these were also problematic. One of these problems was the law and order maintenance in France. Some thinkers even advocated that law and order in France after the revolution was worse than what existed in the Medieval Ages. Not surprisingly the major theorists like Comte and Durkheim were deeply concerned with law and order.