Relationship between knowledge and social change

How are Changes in Knowledge Connected to Social Change?

Introduction

Knowledge and society have a reciprocal relationship. Religious and scientific ideas bring changes to the social order, likewise changes in society help to shape knowledge. This has been most evident since the time of the Enlightenment. From earliest times philosophers had concerned themselves with questions about God and about the human condition, what are sometimes called timeless truths. Sociology, on the other hand was more contextual and historical in that theorists were concerned with the historical emergence of all aspects of human social life.

Sociology emerged through the conditions of modernity, which began in Europe in the 17 th Century but later spread to become worldwide. The new scientific view questioned previously held ways of knowing and thinking about the world. Religious doctrine and teachings that had been seen as authoritative and objective truths which dictated the way most people lived their lives were called into question by advances in science. At the same time modernity engendered huge technological and social change that led to a break with what had gone before. The French revolution, and in England, the Industrial revolution, which dramatically changed the face of the social world, were decisive elements in the emergence of a theory of society that was distinct from other branches of philosophy (Giddens, 2001).

The revolution was based on notions of individual freedom and human rights; it shook the social and political foundations of France and had repercussions across Europe. It also contained within it economic consequences that

destroyed the foundations of feudal society. It questioned the idealized and inward looking existence of philosophy (see Morrison, 1995). Historical development's impact on philosophy was most evident in Hegel's work which had profound implications for the development of social theory. Hegel took the view that the revolution had not just influenced the way philosophy saw itself; it fundamentally changed the way philosophers dealt with reality and history. History and the social order had been seen as fixed, the revolution changed that and Hegel observed that as one form of social and political existence ended so another took its place.. Hegel viewed the individual as a subject within history and history as developmental and thus liberative. This was the first time that history and humanity's role within it had been recognised as an ongoing and changing process. Other 19 [th] century thinkers sought to understand the changing world in which they lived.

Knowledge and Social Science

Auguste Comte is sometimes called the founder of sociology as he coined the term. Comte was influenced by the way scientists investigated the physical world and he sought to create a science of society which would explain the social world in a similar manner. He believed that the scientific method allowed us to uncover universal laws. Comte's thinking developed into what is known as positivism. This holds that science should be concerned with observable facts thus knowledge about society had to be based on empirical evidence i. e. observation and experiment (Callincos).

Comte was followed by Durkheim who also took the view that social life should be studied in the same way that scientists studied the physical world. He and other positivists believed that social facts about the world could be

established through the collection of statistical data. In this way sociologists could study cause and effect in society. For Durkheim sociology was about the discovery of social facts, sociologists should study aspects of life that shape individuals such as religion and economics. Because social change is so rapid the modern world presents us with difficulties that affect our lifestyles and cause human beings to feel unsettled. Durkheim described this process as anomie, a feeling of despair that was a result of modern life.

The ideas of Karl Marx contrast with those of Comte and Durkheim who were interested in the structure of society. He also sought to explain the changes that were taking place in society. Marx said that the philosophers had only interpreted the world when it needed to be changed. Drawing on Hegel's idea of the development of history Marx developed what he called a materialist conception of history (Morris, 1995). Social change, he argued is not the result of ideas, but of economic processes. Historical development is the result of class conflict. Religion was a false ideology that upheld the interests of the ruling class and kept the working classes in submission. Max Weber also wanted to understand social change but was critical of some of Marx's views. Weber believed that ideas and values were just as important as economic processes and he felt that sociology should focus on action not structure (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). Weber maintained that capitalism was not simply the result of class conflict, what he termed the ' spirit;' of capitalism was the result of a particular view of the world. He maintained that capitalism was the direct result of a particular religious view of the world, that of Calvinism. They worked hard [1] because that was what God wanted and this resulted in the accumulation of capital. Their success

was, for them, a sign of God's grace. Thus, for Weber, rather than study society as a set of social facts, we need to try to understand the meanings that human beings give to their actions. This brought about a continuing divide in sociology between positivism and interpretavism, social structure versus human action. Those who follow an interpretative view of studying society argue that no causal explanation of human behaviour is possible without some understanding of the meanings that individuals give to their actions (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). [2] Weber believed that human action was creative whereas Durkheim believed that our actions were limited by social structures.

Later Developments

Marx, Durkheim and Weber, are known as the founding fathers of sociology who although divided in their accounts of society all sought to make sense of the changing societies that they lived in (Morrison, 1995). Their thought influenced later sociologists. Functionalism developed out of Durkheim's thinking. Its most prominent thinkers are the American sociologists Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons. Functionalism holds that society is a system whose various parts work together and this produces social solidarity and cohesion (Giddens, 2001). [3] Thus functionalists examined the institutions of society, the family and education to show how they worked in the development of society and promoted social cohesion.

Marx's thinking developed largely through conflict theories. Inherent in Marx's thought was the idea that one set of people in society were in conflict with another (the class divide) this has been most obvious in the

development of feminist theories. Feminists such as Walby (1990) have used Marx's analysis of class in the analysis of the rise of patriarchy and the struggle between the sexes. These relationships are characterised by the fact that one group has power and authority while another does not. Weber's thought has been seen as important to the development of symbolic interactionism as found in the work of George Herbert Mead an American anthropologist. This view holds that individuals have an image of themselves that is reinforced by their interactions with others. Phenomenology is a further development of interactionism but it goes further than interactionists in that they focus solely on the subjective aspects of social life.

The ideas of the founding fathers have been termed ' grand theories' but with the demise of modernity the idea that history is progressive has been called into question. Society is not a seamless whole but plural and diverse, it has thus been described as post-modern (Lyotard, 1989).

Postmodernists argue that objective knowledge of the world is not possible because knowledge reflects the interests of its producers. Michel Foucault (1975) was a French sociologist who argued that knowledge was a result of the power relations that exist in society. Power works through discourse [4] and shapes our attitudes towards sexuality, crime and criminals and madness. Foucault, through his ' archeology' of knowledge [5] Foucault argued that what we understand of say mental illness or sexuality is a result of social development.

Conclusion

Clearly knowledge and social change are very closely linked. The immense changes in society over the past three hundred years have resulted in philosophers and social scientists attempting to understand the world, why things happen the way they do, why we do what we do. They also look at the development of social institutions, and in Foucault's case [6] the development of knowledge itself through discourse. The emergence of sociology is directly related to social change and sociologists attempts to understand such changes have resulted in the production of knowledge. At the same time new knowledge about the world we live in helps to facilitate social change, e. g. feminist perspectives have resulted in huge changes in women's status in today's society.

Bibliography

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Footnotes

[1] What Weber termed the Protestant work ethic

[2] See page 972

[3] See page 17

[4] The way we talk and think about a subject

An approach which tries to make sense of what we know and how we know it by digging into the past

[5]

[6] And also Khun's with his ideas about paradigms or models of acceptable knowledge which change over time. Thus changing views about mental health, childbirth and parenting.