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Q1(b)

Discuss the relevance of historical method in the study of society.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the relevance of historical method in the study of society
- Keep the discussion within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Historical method treats institutions as dated products, not as timeless attitudes.

Marx, **Weber**, and **Durkheim** all needed sequences of production, domination, and solidarity.

Indian caste, law, and **Census** household forms show path dependence.

It situates survey and ethnography; it is not a substitute for them.

Introduction

Historical method studies society as a sequence of institutions, not as a snapshot of attitudes. It is relevant because present structures are sediments of past struggles, laws, and techniques.

Body**Why history is not optional**

- **Karl Marx** treated modes of production as historically successive. Class cannot be read only from a current income table.
- **Max Weber** used historical comparison of religion, law, and bureaucracy to explain Occidental rationalisation.
- **Emile Durkheim** still needed the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity as a historical type, even when he used rates.

What the method does

- **It recovers path dependence:** caste, joint property, and colonial law in India are not inventions of last year's survey.
- It supplies cases for comparison, as in **Weber**'s ideal types of domination and city.
- **It checks presentism:** a "modern family" claim must face **Census** household forms across decades.

Limits

- History without concepts is chronicle. Talcott Parsons and later functionalists sometimes flattened time into system needs.
- The method does not replace ethnography or survey; it situates them.

Flow diagram

Historical method -> Marx modes
Historical method -> Weber comparison
Historical method -> Durkheim types of solidarity
Historical method -> Present structure as sediment

Conclusion

Historical method is relevant because society is a process. **Marx**, **Weber**, and **Durkheim** all used time, in different keys. Without it, structure looks natural and change looks like a mood.

Facts & figures

Marx

Mode of production is a historical type; capitalism is not a natural market from all time.

Weber

Comparative history of religion and law underpins his sociology of rationalisation.

Durkheim

Division of labour is a historical movement from mechanical to organic solidarity.

Indian Census

Serial household and work tables make change visible only if definitions are historically compared.