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Introduction to Sociology

Have you ever wondered why individuals and societies are so varied ? Do you ask what social forces have shaped different existences ? The quest to understand society is urgent and important, for if we cannot understand the social world, we are more likely to be overwhelmed by it. We also need to understand **social processes** if we want to **influence them**. **SOCIOLOGY** can help us to understand ourselves better, since it examines **how the social world influences the way we think, feel, and act**. It can also help with **decision-making**, both our own and that of larger organizations. Sociologists can gather “systematic” (i.e: scientific nor random) information from which to make a decision, provide insights into what is going on in a situation, and present alternatives.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology is the scientific **study of society**, including patterns of **social relationships, social interaction**, and **culture**. The term sociology was first used by Frenchman **Auguste Comte** in the **1830s** when he proposed a synthetic science uniting all knowledge about human activity. In the academic world, sociology is considered **one of the social sciences**.

What Do Sociologists Study?

Sociologists study all things human, **from the interactions between two people to the complex relationships between nations or multinational corporations**. While sociology assumes that human actions are patterned, individuals still have room for choices. Becoming aware of the social processes that influence the way humans think, feel, and behave plus having the will to act can help individuals to shape the social forces they face.

The Origins of Sociology

Sociologists believe that our social **surroundings influence thought and action**. For example, the rise of the social sciences developed in response to **social changes**. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans were exploring the world and voyagers returned from Asia, the Americas, Africa, and the South Seas with amazing stories of other societies and civilizations. Widely different social practices challenged the view that European life reflected the natural order of God.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Western Europe was rocked by technical, economic, and social changes that forever changed the social order. Science and technology were developing rapidly. James Watt invented the steam engine in 1769, and in 1865 Joseph Lister discovered that an antiseptic barrier could be placed between a wound and germs in the atmosphere to inhibit infection. These and other **scientific developments** spurred **social changes** and offered hope that scientific methods might help **explain the social as well as the natural world**. This trend was part of a more general growth in rationalism.

The industrial revolution began in Britain in the late 18th century. By the late nineteenth century, the old order was collapsing “under the twin blows of **industrialism** and **revolutionary democracy**”. Mechanical industry was growing, and thousands of people were migrating to cities to work in the new factories. People once rooted in the land and social communities where they farmed found themselves crowded into cities. The **traditional authority** of **the church**, the village, and the family were being undermined by impersonal factory and city life.

Capitalism also grew in Western Europe in the 19th century. This meant that relatively few people owned the means of production—such as factories—while many others had to sell their labor to those owners. At the same time, relatively impersonal financial markets began to expand. The modern epoch was also marked by the development of administrative state power, which involved increasing concentrations of information and armed power (Giddens, 1987 : 27).

Finally, there was enormous **population growth worldwide** in this period, due to longer life expectancy and major decreases in child death rates. These massive **social changes** lent new urgency to the development of the social sciences, as early sociological thinkers struggled with the vast implications of economic, social and **political revolutions**. All the major figures in the early years of sociology thought about the “**great transformation**” from simple, **preliterate societies to massive, complex, industrial societies**.

The Institutionalization of Sociology

In the United States, sociology was taught by that name for the first time at the University of Kansas in 1890 by Frank Blackmar, under the course title Elements of Sociology, where it remains the oldest continuing sociology course in the United States. The first academic department of sociology was established in 1892 at the University of Chicago by Albion W. Small, who in 1895 founded the American Journal of Sociology.

The first European department of sociology was founded in 1895 at the University of Bordeaux by Émile Durkheim, founder of *L'Année Sociologique* (1896). The first sociology department to be established in the United Kingdom was at the London School of Economics and Political Science (home of the British Journal of Sociology) in 1904.

In 1919 a sociology department was established in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilian's University of Munich by Max Weber.

International cooperation in sociology began in 1893 when René Worms founded the *Institut International de Sociologie*, which was later eclipsed by the much larger International Sociological Association (ISA), founded in 1949. In 1905, the American Sociological Association, the world's largest association of professional sociologists, was founded, and in 1909 the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (German Society for Sociology) was founded by Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber, among others.

AUGUSTE COMTE (1798–1857)

He is considered the “father of sociology,” he became interested in studying society because of the changes that took place as a result of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. During the French Revolution, which began in 1789, France’s class system changed dramatically. Aristocrats suddenly lost their money and status, while peasants, who had been at the bottom of the social ladder, rose to more powerful and influential positions. The Industrial Revolution followed on the heels of the French Revolution, unfolding in Western Europe throughout the 1800s. During the Industrial Revolution, people abandoned a life of agriculture and moved to cities to find factory jobs. They worked long hours in dangerous conditions for low pay. New social problems emerged and, for many decades, little was done to address the plight of the urban poor.

Auguste Comte looked at the extensive changes brought about by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution and tried to make sense of them. He felt that the social sciences that existed at the time, including political science and history, couldn’t adequately explain the chaos and upheaval he saw around him. He decided an entirely new science was needed. He called this new science sociology, which comes from the root word **socius**, a Latin word that means “companion” or “being with others.”