

the subject matter of sociology

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Any attempt to set limits to a field of intellectual endeavor is inherently futile. Whatever boundaries we set will inevitably omit men whose work should be included. Yet when we stretch the boundaries to bring these men and these works within the field, we inevitably incorporate some we otherwise would have excluded. And what seems to us today firmly entrenched as part of our little community, may yesterday have been an alien enclave and tomorrow may have set itself outside our walls as an independent discipline trying to define its own boundaries.

Yet no student can rightfully be expected to enter on a field of study which is totally undefined and unbounded. If he must be responsible for everything, he will master nothing. Indeed he will flee in panic, and properly so. To define the limits of a field of inquiry may prove, in the long run, to have been only a gesture, but for a start some delimitation, however tentative, is indispensable. The danger is really not too great if we keep in mind that any boundaries we establish are an aid to understanding. They should serve as a loose cloak to delimit form, and not as a rigid suit of armor which is endlessly constraining no matter how useful for fighting off those from other disciplines making claims to the same territory.

Three Paths to a Definition

Three main paths are available for delineating the subject matter of sociology.

1. The historical, whereby we seek through study of the classic sociological writing to find the central traditional concerns and interests of sociology as an intellectual discipline. In brief, we ask: "What did the founding fathers say?"

2. The empirical, whereby we study current sociological work to discover those subjects to which the discipline gives most attention. In other words, we ask: "What are contemporary sociologists doing?"

3. The analytical, whereby we arbitrarily divide and delimit some larger subject matter and allocate it among different disciplines. We ask, in effect: "What does reason suggest?"

The historical approach has piety to commend it. It offers us the opportunity to benefit from the wisdom of the past. It enables us to understand issues which can be grasped only if we comprehend their background. Of course, people may read the same history quite differently. In addition, the historical method runs the risk of making our thinking rigid, since tradition may be poorly suited to deal with emerging problems of the present and the future.

The empirical method is least ambiguous; it mainly requires some form of counting. Of course, what contemporary sociologists emphasize in their work may be simply a passing fancy, having little connection with the important work of the past or little promise for the future. In the opinion of Professor Pitirim Sorokin, current sociological preoccupations are nothing but "fads or foibles,"¹ and, in the view of C. Wright Mills, they indicate a decline of "the sociological imagination."²

The analytical approach is the least troublesome. A few lines of definition, a few more paragraphs of explanation, and we have it. This is a time-honored path followed continuously since it was first marked out by Auguste Comte, the father of sociology. But decrees dividing the realms of human learning have none of the force of law. Scholars and scientists go where their interests lead them; they study what they like when they wish; they are natural poachers with little regard for property rights and "no trespassing" signs. The arbitrary definition of fields of study, while often aesthetically satisfying, is, therefore, generally a poor guide to what is really happening. It presents a neat master plan, but for lack of effective zoning laws the factual structure of research often bears little resemblance to it.

There is no need for us to prejudge the issue. Each perspective may offer us something of value in understanding sociology. I have avoided imposing a "pre-packaged" definition of its subject matter, choosing instead to allow a conception to emerge from a diverse set of relevant materials. Since the method is inductive, it requires a bit of patience. Answers will not always be forthcoming straightway. Yet I trust that those which emerge more gradually will also fade away less rapidly. By this method of presentation, furthermore, I hope not only to delineate the subject matter of the field but, in the course of doing so, to communicate something of sociology's history and an impression of contemporary issues. Both are themes to which we will often return.

¹ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences* (Chicago: Regnery, 1956).

² C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

It would not be entirely honest to say: "I let the facts speak for themselves." Facts may *speak* for themselves, but they cannot *select* themselves. I have, however, tried conscientiously to select the facts without prejudice, allowing a wide variety of points of view to be represented. Needless to say, included prominently among these points of view is my own. My objective is to develop a broad and inclusive conception of sociology. This requires searching for unifying themes and common bases of agreement. But I have made no effort to disguise the great diversity of opinion which exists, nor to deny the frequently deep disagreement which often divides the sociological community.

What the Founding Fathers Said

Professor Sorokin's standard work on *Contemporary Sociological Theories*³ cites well over 1,000 men whose work is important enough to mention in a review of the development of modern sociology. The standard "history and interpretation" of the evolution of *Social Thought from Lore to Science*⁴ by Howard Becker and Harry Elmer Barnes fills two volumes of 1,178 long pages, apart from notes and appendices. In the face of this massive array, who is to say which men define the sociological tradition?

There are four men, however, whom everyone in sociology, regardless of his special emphasis, bias, or bent, will probably accept as the central figures in the development of modern sociology. They are: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Together, they span the whole of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, during which modern sociology was formed. They represent the main national centers—France, England, and Germany—in which sociology first flourished and in which the modern tradition began. Each exerted a profound personal influence on the conception of sociology as an intellectual discipline. It seems particularly relevant, therefore, to explore their opinions about the proper subject matter of sociology.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who gave sociology its name, devoted more energy to expressing hopes for and to staking out the claims of sociology than to defining its subject matter. He felt that social science in his time stood in the same relation to its future as once astrology stood in regard to the science of astronomy and as alchemy stood in relation to chemistry. Only in the distant future, he argued, would the sub-division of the field become practicable and desirable, and for his time he felt it "impossible . . . to anticipate what the principle of distribution may be."⁵ We cannot get from him, therefore, any list of topics or sub-fields of sociological interest.

Although Comte was reluctant to specify in detail the sub-fields of sociology, he did propose and consistently treat sociology as divided into two main parts, the social statics and social dynamics. These two concepts represent a basic division in the subject matter of sociology which in many different forms and guises appears throughout the history of the field and persists today. In the first case the major institutions or institutional complexes of society—such as economy, family, or polity—are taken to be the major units for sociological analysis, and sociology is conceived of as the

³ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (New York: Harper, 1928).

⁴ Howard Becker and Harry E. Barnes, *Social Thought from Lore to Science*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Harren Press, 1952).

⁵ Auguste Comte (H. Martineau, trans.), *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (New York: Blanchard, 1855), p. 442.

study of interrelations between such institutions. In the words of Comte: "The Statical study of sociology consists in the investigation of the laws of action and reaction of the different parts of the social system."⁶ The parts of a society, he argued, cannot be understood separately, "as if they had an independent existence." Instead, they must be seen "as in mutual relation . . . forming a whole which compels us to treat them in combination."⁷ He referred to this principle of "universal social interconnection" as the "master-thought" of his whole approach.⁸

The second major division of sociology which Comte proposed he called social dynamics. If statics was to be the study of how the parts of societies interrelate, dynamics was to focus on whole societies as the unit of analysis and to show how they developed and changed through time. "We must remember," he said, "that the laws of social dynamics are most recognisable when they relate to the largest societies."⁹ Comte rather believed that he already had the problem solved. He was convinced that all societies moved through certain fixed stages of development, and that they progressed toward ever increasing perfection.¹⁰ This view will find few supporters today. Fewer still would acknowledge that the stages identified by Comte are those through which all societies in fact have passed or will pass. What is important for us to remember, however, is that Comte felt the comparative study of societies as wholes was a major subject for sociological analysis.

Herbert Spencer's (1820–1903) three-volume *Principles of Sociology*, published in 1877, was the first full-scale systematic study explicitly devoted to an exposition of sociological analysis. He was much more precise than Comte in specifying the topics or special fields for which he felt sociology must take responsibility. Thus, in the first volume of the *Principles* he urged that:

The Science of Sociology has to give an account of [how] successive generations of units are produced, reared and fitted for co-operation. The development of the family thus stands first in order. . . . Sociology has next to describe and explain the rise and development of that political organization which in several ways regulates affairs—which combines the actions of individuals . . . and which restrains them in certain of the dealings with one another. . . . There has to be similarly described the evolution of ecclesiastical structures and functions. . . . The system of restraints whereby the minor actions of citizens are regulated, has also to be dealt with. . . . The stages through which the industrial part passes . . . have to be studied . . . [as well as] the growth of those regulative structures which the industrial part develops within itself. . . .¹¹

The subject matter of sociology as Spencer defined it contains quite familiar elements. Here and there we must translate a term. For example, when he speaks of the "system of restraints" he is obviously referring to the subject which in modern sociology is called "social control." Otherwise we have no difficulty in relating the subject matter of sociology delineated by contemporary sociologists to the outline given by Spencer. In the order given

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

¹⁰ We return to a fuller discussion of these evolutionary theories of social development in Chap. 3.

¹¹ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3rd ed. Vol. I (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1910), pp. 437–440.

in the quotation, the fields of sociology according to Spencer are: the family, politics, religion, social control, and industry or work. In addition, Spencer explicitly mentioned the sociological study of associations, communities, the division of labor, social differentiation or stratification, the sociology of knowledge and of science, and the study of art and aesthetics. An unbiased examination of the table of contents of Spencer's *Principles* in the light of contemporary work described in our next section suggests that the range of subjects with which sociology deals has been remarkably stable for a long period of time.

Spencer would by no means have agreed, however, that sociology was limited to a list of institutions like the family or to processes such as social control. He also stressed the obligation of sociology to deal with the interrelations between the different elements of society, to give an account of how the parts influence the whole and are in turn reacted upon, and in the process may transform or be transformed. As examples of such "reciprocal influences" he called attention to the effects of sexual norms on family life, and the relations between political institutions and other forms of regulating behavior such as religion and ceremonial activity. He also advised parallel study of the organization of the priesthood and other hierarchies to reveal "how changes of structure in it are connected with changes of structure in them."¹²

Spencer added yet another responsibility for sociology—namely, to accept the whole society as its unit for analysis. He maintained that the parts of society, although discrete units, were not arranged haphazardly. The parts bore some "constant relation" and this fact made of society as such a meaningful "entity," a fit subject for scientific inquiry. On these grounds he held that sociology must compare "societies of different kinds and societies in different stages."¹³ To grasp the principles of sociology, he maintained, "we have to deal with facts of structure and function displayed by societies in general, dissociated, so far as may be, from special facts due to special circumstances."¹⁴ Thus, the main division of sociological emphasis suggested by Comte is clearly evident in Spencer's thinking as well.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) did not set forth his conception of the proper subject matter of sociology in as full detail as did Spencer. We can, however, easily reconstruct his position from remarks he made in his *Rules of Sociological Method* and his various other writings.¹⁵

Durkheim frequently referred to what he called the "special fields" of sociology, and he clearly favored their widespread development. Sociology could not become science, he said, "until it renounced its initial and overall claim upon the totality of social reality [and distinguished] ever more among parts, elements, and different aspects which could serve as subject matters for specific problems." In reviewing his own work and that of his associates in France, he affirmed their joint "ambition to initiate for sociology what Comte called the era of specialization."¹⁶ Durkheim clearly approved the idea that sociology should concern itself with a wide range of institutions and social processes. He said for example: "There are, in reality, as many

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 439.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵ A number of these have been gathered in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *Émile Durkheim, 1858–1917: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1960), 463 pp.

¹⁶ Durkheim, "Sociology," in Wolff (ed.), *Émile Durkheim*, p. 380.