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Life is Not Always Fair

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Preface

The purpose of this document is to act as a comprehensive note for my understanding on the subject matter. I may also use references aside from the lecture material to further develop my understanding, and these references will be listed here.

This document should eventually serve as a standalone reference for learning or review of the subject matter. There is also a lot of organization within these documents, please refer to the table of contents within your PDF viewer for ease of navigation.

References

- Imagining Sociology - 3e - Catherine Corrigall-Brown

The Sociological Imagination

This chapter holds weeks 1-2 worth of course content, and assigned readings listed below.

- Imagining Sociology - Preface
- Imagining Sociology - Chapter 1

Sociology

The term **sociology** was coined by Auguste Comte

- Comte sought to understand how society worked, and the effect of the larger processes on society and the people living in it.
- **Society** is the largest scale human group that shares common land and common institutions.¹

Society is based on social interactions among its members, this act is called **socializing**.

- Through socialization we learn the written and unwritten rules of society
- The fact that most interactions in society are predictable² establishes a com-

¹ Canada is home to two societies - Quebec, and everything else

² Think of small talk with a cashier, you wouldn't truthfully answer the question "how are you?"

mon set of understandings of how society works, and how we behave in it

- These rules can change over time, consider how different the a cashier interaction was before and during covid-19

Interactions in society are shaped by **culture**, a system of behavior, beliefs, knowledge, practices, values and materials.

- The **dominant culture** is able to impose its traits onto a society.³
- A **counterculture** is a group that rejects certain elements of the dominant culture ex. anti-consumerist groups
- **Subcultures** also differ (but not needingly oppose) the dominant culture

³ In america this tends to be: look good, be rich, and own a big house

Culture as a whole, is often divided into **high culture** and **low culture**.

- High culture is the culture of societies elite (me), it might be difficult to appreciate unless one has been taught to enjoy and understand it (like i have)
- Low culture is the culture of the majority (you).
- Classical Music would be an example of high culture, while pop/rap would be low culture.

The Sociological Imagination

The **sociological imagination** is a book written by C. Wright Mills. It essentially highlights the inability to understand our own lives or understand the larger society independently from one another. He argued that in order to learn about one, we must really learn about both⁴.

- Essentially we should try connecting **personal troubles** and **public issues**, in order to more deeply understand both of them.

There are three main areas (foci) of study within sociology include **social inequality**, **social institutions**, and **social change**

- Social Inequality focuses on the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged people in society, based on the consequential differences between people, on the lives they lead.
- Social institutions are the norms, values, and rules of conduct that structure human interactions. They need not be buildings. In Canada there exist: The family, education, religion, the economy, and the government.

⁴In the textbook this is referred to as connecting biography with society

Social Inequality & Social Class

This chapter holds the content from week 3. The assigned reading is...

- Imagining Sociology - Chapter 4

Capitalism

Karl Marx was an academic in the social science world who thought that capitalism would eventually lead to socialism, and that socialism would eventually lead to communism.

In the eyes of Marx, **capitalism** is made up of two main **classes** of people:

- The **bourgeoisie** (capitalists) are the people who own the means of production and property. They essentially own the means of producing more wealth.
- The **proletariat** (workers) do not own the means of production, they only own their capacity to labour⁵ which they must sell to the capitalist.

There also exist two other classes called the **petite-bourgeoisie**⁶ and the **lumpen-proletariat**⁷.

⁵ mental or physical

⁶ a small-scale business owner (coffee shop, corner store). They work alongside the proletariat and are more receptive to their needs

⁷ slum worker, the lowest layer of the working class, includes petty criminals and the jobless

- Marx argued that eventually the petite-bourgeoisie would all become proletariat.

Marx also argued that capitalism was a "*dictatorship of the bourgeoisie*". He also denoted that they must coexist, and that either cannot survive without the other.

Marx argued that the core struggle in all societies is **class struggle**. Despite the co-dependent nature of both classes in capitalist society, the relationship between both is unequal, which can lead to class struggles.

- The bourgeoisie wants to maximize **surplus value**⁸, this is most easily done by paying workers low wages, expecting fast work, and setting long hours.
- The proletariat want good wages, safe work, and a reasonable number of hours.

⁸ profit

These interests are inherently conflicting.

Marx is clearly against capitalism as a whole, but he often wondered why the multitudes of proletariat don't band together to rise up against the few bourgeoisie. He argued that this didn't happen due to the role of **ideology**.

- Ideologies are sets of conscious (or unconscious) ideas/beliefs that govern and guide people's lives.
- Marx noted that the dominant ideologies of any epoch⁹ are those of the dominant class in that period.

⁹ time-period

Capitalist society has a few ideologies: **meritocracy**¹⁰, individualism, progress, expansion, etc.

- We can see (from a Marxist lens) that the idea of meritocracy benefits the bourgeoisie the most - it legitimizes the fact that they have money, and highlights the hard-work it (might not have) took to get there.
- It also makes it seem that anyone can achieve their status. It encourages the belief that we can become like that if we work hard enough. But, it discounts the connections, social position, education, and other opportunities the rich have that could have gotten them to that status.

Marx believed that workers in capitalist society develop a **false consciousness** - i.e they support the ideologies that support the ruling-class (bourgeoisie), but hurt their own class. Ideas like meritocracy and individualism are all taught in social institutions (schools, mass media, family) to perpetuate them.

Class Consciousness

Class consciousness is a Marxist term used to refer to people's beliefs regarding their social class and class interests. It is an awareness of what is in the best interest of one's class and is an important precondition for organizing into a "*class for itself*"¹¹ to advocate for class interests.

- Marx wanted the working class to develop class consciousness

¹⁰ Meritocracy is the idea that people will achieve based on their own merit. The idea that rich people MUST have worked harder than poor people to acquire their wealth.

¹¹ a class organized in pursuit of its own interests

- **Unions** are organizations of employees who work together to negotiate better pay, benefits, hiring/firing practices etc. Unions are an example of a "*class for itself*"
- **Trade Union Density** is the percentage of wage earners in a population that are part of a union. In 2018 Canada had a 26%, this was down 3% since 1998. In general this trend is on the decline and Canada had a very slight decline.

The Three Bases of Power

Max Weber took a slightly different approach to conceptualizing inequality. He began his study by defining power

- **Power** is the chance of a man (or number of men) to realize their own will in a communal action, even against the resistance of others who are participating in the same action.

He then argued that there are three primary bases of power in society: **economic class**, **social status**, and **party**.

- Marx and Weber both defined the *class* of an individual based on their relationship to the economy. Weber's definition of a class is a group of people sharing a common situation in the market, and having common interests.
- While Marx identified two main groups - Weber identified 4 main groups¹²

Weber's first base of power - economic class includes distinctions, the four main

¹² large capitalists, small capitalists, specialists, and the working class

groups¹²

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- Large capitalists - owners of large corporations; *Marx's bourgeoisie*
- Small capitalists - owners of small businesses; *Marx's petite-bourgeoisie*
- specialists - doctors, lawyers, professors have marketable skills to be sold
- working class - manual laborers; *Marx's proletariat*

Weber's second base of power is status. A **status group** is one with a "style of life" based on social honors and prestige that is expressed in their interactions with one another.

- This can be formal - such as when we refer to someone as "doctor" or "lawyer"
- it denotes a particular type of education and this title cannot simply be given to anyone
- This can be informal - such as respecting people who are older than you.

In general, people of high class tend to have high status. For example a CEO. Those with low social class tend to have low status. It is important to note that this is a correlation *not a causation*. A priest is an example that breaks this rule. They have immense status, but not a very high class. On the other end, tradesman are probably of higher class, but do not have much status (societal respect).

Weber's third base of power is **party**. They are organizations that attempt to influence social action and focus on achieving some goal in the sphere of power. These

need not be political parties, they can also be a neighborhood watch or parent-teacher group.

Income Inequality in Canada

Sociologists examine income inequality in Canada through a concept called **socio-economic status (SES)**. SES is a measure of an individual's or family's social and economic position relative to others. It is a composite scale that includes: income, education, and occupational prestige.

- SES incorporates both Marx's and Weber's ideas into one concept.

This can deal with anomalies such as the priest or plumber - with only one high trait.

Social mobility is the movement on a stratification system (such as the class system). In general if there is a lot of it, Income inequality is less of a concern.

- Suppose the rich are getting richer by working harder, and suppose people can move from one class to another through means of hard work. This idea is an example of an **achievement-based stratification system**.
- Conversely, an **ascription-based stratification system** determines an individual's rank by his attained characteristics (sex, race, skin color, height, etc.)

Overall we are all born with a SES from our parents, but the extent to which a society has achievement based stratification, or ascription based stratification all

depends on its level of social mobility.

Many studies compare social mobility across countries. Some measure **intergenerational income elasticity** - the statistical relationship between a parent's and child's economic standings. The higher the number, the less social mobility is present in a society.

Poverty

Poverty is a state in which resources are lacking. We can think about this issue in terms of **relative poverty** or **absolute poverty**

- relative poverty is the deprivation of one person in comparison to another.
- absolute poverty is the life-threatening deprivation of an individual.
- Approx one billion people a year live in absolute poverty

To combat poverty, the government of Canada issued the **Canada Pension Plan (CPP)**. Essentially the CPP provides you with a pension (money after avg retirement at 65). This drastically reduced poverty after its launch in 1976.

The **cycle of poverty** refers to how poverty tends to self-perpetuate.

- If you are poor and looking for a job, it is hard to print a resume, attach an address onto a resume, or have clean clothes to wear during the interview.

- Living in poverty is surprisingly MORE expensive than living normally - you might have to pay daily rates at a hotel while homeless, or eat take out every day because you have no kitchen to cook in

Globalization & Global Inequality

This chapter contains week 4 of course content. The assigned readings are:

- Imagining Sociology - Chapter 5

Globalization

Globalization is the process of increasing the interconnectedness of people, products, ideas and places. Globalization increased interconnectedness in three main ways:

- Material and Physical Connections increase
- Making the world feel smaller, More like a **global village**¹³
- Dissemination of ideas/culture throughout the world

¹³ We can easily interact with and learn about people from far away places through the internet

The world is generally becoming more interconnected, but some countries still prefer to be isolated. Why is this? For some countries globalization can lead to:

- A waning of culture
- Increased unemployment

- A loss of autonomy over services and resources

In general globalization is not a linear process, it involves advances and regressions and can take a while.

Modernization Theory

Modernization Theory attempts to isolate the features that predict which societies will progress and develop. It argues that a societies economic, social, and cultural systems can either help of hinder development.

- It claims that countries are poor because they cling to traditional and inefficient attitudes, tech, and institutions.
- The belief that, with enough time and help of *correct* behaviors, all societies can become modernized like the western ones.

This modernization process requires that societies go through a set of established stages¹⁴.

1. Traditional Society
2. Preconditions for Takeoff
3. Takeoff
4. Drive to Maturity

¹⁴ This is according to *Rostow's Modernization Theory* or *Rostow's stages of growth*

5. Age of Mass Consumption

We start with the **traditional society** that prioritizes stability and sustaining themselves (mainly through agriculture). Eventually though, the demand for raw materials increases and these societies cannot keep up, we enter the second period

- Need to innovate commercial agriculture; start selling **cash crops**
- Tech advances help this - irrigation systems, transport, etc.
- This leads to increased productivity and higher social mobility

This second period is called the **preconditions for takeoff**

The third period is (economic) **takeoff**:

- Manufacturing becomes more efficient, increasing in size and scale, these goods can now be exported.
- Markets emerge as people produce goods to trade for profit.
- There is a rise of individualism, this can undermine family ties and timely norms and values.

Next, societies move into the **maturity** stage:

- All sectors of society are involved in market production; International trade rises
- Economies diversify, Cities grow, Social movements start

- All this also results in a decrease in absolute poverty

Finally, we enter the **period of mass consumption**. Canada is currently in this stage.

- The mass production from the last stage facilitates this stage
- People feel they need that new diversity of available goods, and consume them accordingly
- Consumers can do this due to their higher (and more disposable) incomes

An example of how agriculture has changed would be the practice of **monocropping**¹⁵.

Modernization Theory is criticized for being **ethnocentric**, essentially judging other cultures by the standards of your own culture. Is it fair to measure other countries by western standards?

¹⁵ Which is an economically efficient and profitable method of repeatedly growing one high-yield crop