

Lecture 1: Origin of Sociology as a Discipline

Sociology is the study of human social life. Because human social life is so expansive, sociology has many sub-sections of study, ranging from the analysis of conversations to the development of theories to try to understand how the entire world works. This lecture will introduce you to sociology and explain why it is important, how it can change your perspective on the world around you, and give a brief history of the discipline.

What is Sociology?

The social world is changing. Some argue it is growing; others say it is shrinking. The important point to grasp is: society does not remain unchanged over time. As will be discussed in more detail below, sociology has its roots in significant societal changes (e.g., the industrial revolution, the creation of empires, and the enlightenment of scientific reasoning). Early practitioners developed the discipline as an attempt to understand societal changes.

Some early sociological theorists (e.g., Marx, Weber, and Durkheim) were disturbed by the social processes they believed to be driving the change, such as the quest for solidarity, the attainment of social goals, and the rise and fall of classes, to name a few examples. While details of the theories that these individuals developed are discussed in the last module, it is important to note at this point that the founders of sociology were some of the earliest individuals to employ what C. Wright Mills (1959) labeled the *sociological imagination*: the ability to situate personal troubles within an informed framework of social issues.

Mills proposed that “[w]hat the [people] need... is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills 1959). As Mills saw it, the sociological imagination could help individuals cope with the social world by helping them to step outside of their personal worldview and thus seeing the events and social structure that influence their behavior, attitudes, and culture.

The sociological imagination goes beyond *armchair sociology* or *common sense*. Most people believe they understand the world and the events taking place within it. Humans like to attribute causes to events and attempt to understand what is taking place around them. This is why individuals have been using religious ceremonies for centuries to invoke the will of the gods – because they believed the gods controlled certain elements of the natural world (e.g., the weather). Just as the rain dance is an attempt to understand how the weather works without using empirical analysis, *armchair sociology* is an attempt to understand how the social world works without employing scientific methods.

It would be dishonest to say sociologists never sit around (even sometimes in comfy armchairs) trying to figure out how the world works. But in order to test their theories, sociologists get up from their armchairs and enter the social world. They gather data and evaluate their theories in light of the data they collect. Sociologists do not just propose theories about how the social world works. Sociologists test their theories about how the world works using the scientific method. Who are some famous sociologists who use statistical methods to test theories?

Sociologists, like all humans, have values, beliefs, and even pre-conceived notions of what they might find in doing their research. But, as Peter Berger (1963) argued, what distinguishes the sociologist from non-scientific researchers is that “[the] sociologist tries to see what is there. He may have hopes or fears concerning what he may find. But he will try to see, regardless of her/his hopes or fears. It is thus an act of pure perception...” (Berger 1963).

Sociology, then, is an attempt to understand the social world by situating social events in their corresponding environment (i.e., social structure, culture, history) and trying to understand social phenomena by collecting and analyzing empirical data.

Historical Background

Sociology is a relatively new academic discipline. It emerged in the early 19th century in response to the challenges of modernity. Increasing mobility and technological advances resulted in the increasing exposure of people to cultures and societies different from their own. The impact of this exposure was varied, but for some people included the breakdown of traditional norms and customs and warranted a nuanced understanding of how the world works. Sociologists responded to these changes by trying to understand what holds social groups together and also explore possible solutions to the breakdown of social solidarity.

Auguste Comte and Other Founders

The term *sociology* was coined by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in 1838 from the Latin term *socius* (companion, associate) and the Greek term *logia* (study of, speech). Comte hoped to unify all the sciences under sociology; he believed sociology held the potential to improve society and direct human activity, including the other sciences.

While it is no longer a theory employed in Sociology, Comte argued for an understanding of society he labeled *The Law of Three Stages*. Comte, not unlike other enlightenment thinkers, believed society developed in stages.

- The first was the **theological stage** where people took a religious view of society.
- The second was the **metaphysical stage** where people understood society as natural (not supernatural).
- Comte's final stage was the scientific or **positivist stage**, which he believed to be the pinnacle of social development. In the scientific stage, society would be governed by reliable knowledge and would be understood in light of the

knowledge produced by science, primarily sociology. While vague connections between Comte's *Law* and human history can be seen, it is generally understood in Sociology today that Comte's approach is a highly simplified and ill-founded approach to understand social development.

Other *classical* theorists of sociology from the late 19th and early 20th centuries include Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Ferdinand Toennies, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber. As pioneers in Sociology, most of the early sociological thinkers were trained in other academic disciplines, including history, philosophy and economics. The diversity of their trainings is reflected in the topics they researched, including religion, education, economics, psychology, ethics, philosophy, and theology. Perhaps with the exception of Marx, their most enduring influence has been on sociology, and it is in this field that their theories are still considered most applicable.

The Development of the Discipline

The first book with the term *Sociology* in its title was written in the mid-19th century by the English philosopher Herbert Spencer. In the United States, the first *Sociology* course was taught at the University of Kansas, Lawrence in 1890 under the title *Elements of Sociology* (the oldest continuing sociology course in America). The first full-fledged university department of sociology in the United States 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 Emile Durkheim (1896). In 1919 a sociology department was established in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich by Max Weber and in 1920 in Poland by Florian Znaniecki. The first sociology departments in the United Kingdom were founded after the World War II.

International cooperation in sociology began in 1893 when Rene Worms founded the small Institut International de Sociologie that was eclipsed by the much larger International Sociologist Association starting in 1949. In 1905 the American Sociological Association, the world's largest association of professional sociologists, was founded.

Early Sociological Studies

Early sociological studies considered the field to be similar to the natural sciences like physics or biology. As a result, many researchers argued that the methodology used in the natural sciences were perfectly suited for use in the social sciences, including Sociology. The effect of employing the scientific method and stressing empiricism was the distinction of sociology from theology, philosophy and metaphysics. This also resulted in sociology being recognized as an empirical science. This early sociological approach, supported by August Comte, led to positivism, a methodological approach based on sociological naturalism.

However, as early as the 19th century, positivist and naturalist approaches to the study of social life were questioned by scientists like Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert, who argued that the natural world differs from the social world, as human society has culture, unlike the societies of other animals (e.g., ants, dolphins, etc. operate from nature or ecology as opposed to that of civilisation). This view was further developed by Max Weber, who introduced the concept of verstehen. Verstehen is a research approach in which outside observers of a culture relate to an indigenous people on the observer's own terms.

The positivist and verstehen approaches have modern counterparts in sociological methodologies: quantitative and qualitative sociology. Quantitative sociology focuses on measuring social phenomena using numbers and quantities while qualitative sociology focuses on understanding social phenomena. It is disingenuous to claim these two approaches must be or are generally distinct; many sociologists employ both methods in trying to understand the social world.

Sociology and Other Social Sciences

The **social sciences** comprise the application of scientific methods to the study of the human aspects of the world. Psychology studies the human mind and micro-level (or individual) behavior; sociology examines human society; political science studies the governing of groups and countries; communication studies the flow of discourse via various media; economics concerns itself with the production and allocation of wealth in society; and social work is the application of social scientific knowledge in society. Social sciences diverge from the humanities in that many in the social sciences emphasize the scientific method or other rigorous standards of evidence in the study of humanity.

The Development of Social Science

In ancient philosophy, there was no difference between the liberal arts of mathematics and the study of history, poetry or politics – only with the development of mathematical proof did there gradually arise a perceived difference between *scientific* disciplines and the *humanities* or *liberal arts*. Thus, Aristotle studied planetary motion and poetry with the same methods, and Plato mixed geometrical proofs with his demonstration on the state of intrinsic knowledge.

This unity of science as descriptive remained, for example, in the time of Thomas Hobbes who argued that deductive reasoning from axioms created a scientific framework; his book, *Leviathan*, was a scientific description of a political commonwealth. Within decades of Hobbes' work, a revolution took place in what constituted *science*, particularly with the work of Isaac Newton in physics. Newton, by revolutionizing what was then called *natural philosophy*, changed the basic framework by which individuals understood what was *scientific*.

While Newton was merely the archetype of an accelerating trend, the important distinction is that for Newton the mathematical flowed from a presumed reality independent of the observer and it worked by its own rules. For philosophers of the same period, mathematical expression of philosophical ideals were taken to be symbolic of natural human relationships as well: the same laws moved physical and spiritual reality. For examples see Blaise Pascal, Gottfried Leibniz and Johannes Kepler, each of whom took mathematical examples as models for human behavior directly; in Pascal's case, the famous wager; for Leibniz, the invention of binary computation; and for Kepler, the intervention of angels to guide the planets.

In the realm of other disciplines, this created a pressure to express ideas in the form of mathematical relationships. Such relationships, called *Laws* after the usage of the time (philosophy of science) became the model that other disciplines would emulate. In the late 19th century, attempts to apply equations to statements about human behavior became increasingly common. Among the first were the *Laws* of philology, which attempted to map the change overtime of sounds in a language. In the early 20th century, a wave of change came to science that saw *statistical* study sufficiently mathematical to be *science*.

The first thinkers to attempt to combine scientific inquiry with the exploration of human relationships were Sigmund Freud in Austria and William James in the United States. Freud's theory of the functioning of the mind and James' work on experimental psychology had an enormous impact on those who followed.

One of the most persuasive advocates for the view of scientific treatment of philosophy is John Dewey (1859-1952). He began, as Marx did, in an attempt to weld Hegelian idealism and logic to experimental science, for example in his *Psychology* of 1887. However, it is when he abandoned Hegelian constructs and joined the movement in America called Pragmatism that he began to formulate his basic doctrine on the three phases of the process of inquiry:

- Problematic situation, where the typical response is inadequate
- Isolation of data or subject matter
- Reflective, which is tested empirically

With the rise of the idea of quantitative measurement in the physical sciences (see, for example Lord Rutherford's famous maxim that any knowledge that one cannot measure numerically "is a poor sort of knowledge"), the stage was set for the conception of the humanities as being precursors to *social sciences*.

Sociology Today

Although sociology emerged in Comte's vision of sociology eventually subsuming all other areas of scientific inquiry, sociology did not replace the other sciences. Instead, sociology has developed a particular niche in the study of social life.

In the past, sociological research focused on the organization of complex, industrial societies and their influence on individuals. Today, sociologists study a broad range of topics. For instance, some sociologists research macro-structures that organize society, such as race or ethnicity, social class, gender roles, and institutions such as the family. Other sociologists study social processes that represent the breakdown of macro-structures, including deviance, crime and divorce. Additionally, some sociologists study micro-processes such as interpersonal interactions and the socialization of individuals. It should also be noted that recent sociologists, taking cues from anthropologists, have realized the *Western* emphasis of the discipline. In response, many sociology departments around the world are now encouraging multi-cultural research.

In the next lecture, we shall have more extensive discussions on the methods and theories employed in sociology.

References

John J. Macionis, *Sociology* (10th Edition), Prentice Hall, 2004.
C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press, 1961.
Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Anchor, 1963.

Questions

1. What do you understand by the term ‘Sociology’?
2. Describe the process of professionalization of sociology as a discipline.
3. How is sociology related to other social sciences?
4. What do you mean by Comte’s explanation of law of stages?
5. What is scientific stage, according to Auguste Comte?
6. What is the significant trend of sociological research currently?