

Q: Sociology...what is it?

A: That depends...

Copyright: Gary O'Dea 1998.

Sociology...what is it?

Sociology involves and overlaps many varied ways of looking at human development including biologically, culturally, scientifically and politically. From the earliest questions pondered over by philosophers, man as looked at where he came from, how he got here, what was happening and how and what could happen in the future. One of the earliest noted looks at a society was in the book 'Leviathan' that was written by Thomas Hobbes and first published in 1651. The basic view Hobbes seemed to take was that human beings are selfish, only bothered by their own desires etc, that the resources available to achieve these desires are limited and that most people want the same desires, for instance – money / power etc, and are not going to achieve them. Also, that force and fraud would be common uses which to try and achieve these desires, and that a continued pursuit of total self interest could lead to a destructive society, anarchy etc, and to quote Hobbes '*In the state of nature, life would be nasty, short and brutish*'.

The term 'sociology' was first used by Auguste Comte (1798). He is quoted as saying '*It's the Queen of the Sciences*' and it was going to explain how society worked. It took the 'science' tag because at the time the science breakthrough / discoveries etc were coming of age. He approached the studies using the same procedures as those of natural scientists of his day, but had problems with 'reification'. He had a problem with trying to look at it as a separate thing when society is **all** and **everything**.

The early studies were of a conservative / capitalist outlook, the French philosopher Auguste Comte claimed that '*for society to function it has to be stable*'. Comte's approach to society was from a 'Positivists' approach, an approach that uses statistics, generalisations etc. The opposite of this approach is called 'Interpretive' which stemmed ultimately from Immanuel Kant and uses the individualist (i.e. getting involved in the study, covert observations etc...but this approach didn't come about until the 1960s in the USA). Another couple of terms that can be linked to this approach are 'Systems Theories' (positivist) and 'Action Theories' (Interpretivist). These terms were used by Professor Alan Dawe in his book *The Two Sociologies* (1971).

Following Comte's original studies, some 50years later Herbert Spencer said '*society is made up of parts*' he came up with the 'Biological Organism Analogy' and stated '*each part of society does a job*' (i.e. the political system does the same job as the brain in a living creature). In 1897 Emile Durkheim who was made the first ever Professor of Sociology wrote '*Suicide*' which studied the social theories (Positivist Approach) behind this very individual act. The book was a classic example of scientific sociology. He also wrote *The Rules of Sociological Inquiry* which had as Rule 1 '*Treat social facts as things... in that they determine how people behave*'. Another quote of his was '*The whole is more than the sum of the parts*'. For example – 10 people in a room becomes 10 people and 1 class. The American sociologist Talcott

Parsons took Comte's, Spencer's and Durkheim's theories and developed his own term 'Structural Functionalism'. He used 'stability' (family, education, religion) etc as a base. He took the view that what holds society together is the extent to which people share in a common set of basic cultural beliefs. A 'value system' (agreed values, harmony, cohesion, equilibrium) etc. He was a capitalist systems supporter who justified American Capitalism. He also came up with the term 'Structural Differentiation' (society being a simple structure of doing what you had to do). Simple structures start to evolve (possibly get better) 'The March of Progress Theory'.

In America in the 1950s the 'Interpretivist' approach to sociology was becoming stronger (partly tied in with sociologist's study of the drug culture). To 'Tune in and Drop Out' became the rallying call. But in Europe the theories being looked at and taken on were those of Karl Marx. Marxism (The Conflict Theory) was developed in the late 60s based on writings of around a 100 years earlier. Marx claimed to have been a scientist and looked at the 'Structure of Society'. He said "*you behave as you do because of structured society*". Marxism put a different slant on sociology although he followed orthodox economic theories to distinguish three major classes in what he called 'The Factor of Production'.

Land Owners – ownership of land.

Capitalist (Bourgeois) – ownership of capital.

Proletariat (Working Class) – ownership of labour power.

Marx spoke of the downtrodden working class, the anti-capitalist, how capitalist theories are applied to most social conditions – family, education etc. He claimed that the capitalist system reproduces itself through these.

Though it can be claimed that each of these classes was a component in the productive process – land, capital, labour etc Marx regarded the relationship between the classes as one of social inequality, exploitation and domination of the workers by the bourgeois. He claimed that the labourer was actually a 'Producer'. The downtrodden proletariat (workers / labour etc) were as Marx said at the time "*A class in themselves*". Another famous Marx quote appears in the Communist Manifesto '*The history of mankind is the history of class conflict*'. He spoke of economic power giving the rich the resources / authority / power etc over men and this enables them to exercise political power. A clear view for Marx was that the capitalists were not simply an owning class, they were a ruling class too and that their control over key types of capital was the basis for control over society's political life whether democracy existed or not. Conflict in Society – could be traced back to the time of landowners / slaves – onto barons / peasants then into the Industrial Revolution – factory owners / workers etc. this was termed the 'Feudal System'.

For Marx the age old class system in society was about to experience revolution, become demolished and change to an era of a 'Classless Communist Society'. According to Marx a form of the earliest social living would have been 'Primitive Communism'. He also made what he claimed was

a 'scientific prediction' about the future, he said that "*as the world gets more industrial – the gap spreads, rich – richer / poor – poorer*" he termed this 'Polarisation' (poles apart) and claimed this would eventually lead to 'Proletariat Revolt'...

'Workers of the world unite – you have nothing to lose but your chains!'

The title 'Neo Marxist (New Marxist) was adopted by the followers of Marx. A leading French 'Neo Marxist' was Louis Althusser who came up with the description I S A (Ideological State Apparatus) and R S A (Repressive State Apparatus). For him school was the dominant ideological state apparatus. It formed the reproduction of capitalism by a means of compulsory schooling. The state secures a way of teaching us what it wants us to know. He said '*Children learn not only the basic skills necessary for the economy, but also the attitudes required for the successful functioning of the capitalist system.*' What he aligned to the 'Repressive Apparatus' were organisations such as state police / national guard / paramilitary groups etc, who are constructed with the purpose of imposing themselves on people in the case of law and order breaking down / being challenged (using water cannons / guard dogs etc).

Another European sociologist / philosopher that was influenced in his thinking (so it's said by a debate with the ghost of Marx) was a German called Max Weber (1864-1920). He studied the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism. He believed there was some special 'affinity' between Protestant ideas and Capitalist requirements. Capitalism he claimed called for particular attitudes and behaviour (in the ethic of 'work for your needs – save for your needs' etc) and this fitted in with some ethical values in the Protestant religion (i.e. – that those less fortunate were in some cases expected to make the most of what they'd got and to work hard at their 'calling').

Another system he looked at was how several ideological systems can coexist together in one 'class' of people. He looked at this in Imperial China where Taoism and Buddhism were drawn upon by all classes in addition to the official orthodoxy of 'Confucianism.' He looked at how the people drew on resources from all three religions in different situations and according to their needs. For example – to call on Taoist magical practices when they were ill, on Buddhist concepts when they were handling 'ultimate' problems in birth, marriage or death and Confucianism as a guide to everyday life (Weber 1963).

Weber recognised that a person's class was 'unambiguously' a function of his position in the economic system. The worker being a worker because he sells his labour power on the market. Also, he said we accept or reject people as social equals, inferiors or superiors not just on their economic standing, but on their social standing as well. He insisted that social class is potential rather than actual – that people in common situations in a social structure do not always see the situation in the same way, but interpret it in a variety of ways available to them or suggested to them by their cultural social surroundings.

He used the term 'Verstehen' (German for understanding) as a main sociological term – understanding different cultures, society's etc and sharing different ideologies.

Harold Garfinkel looked at the meanings of Weber and also Austrian sociologist / philosopher Alfred Schütz who coined the term 'Phenomenology' (no big answers just things going on) i.e. that people do their own things – share different peoples reality's and termed it 'Ethnomethodology' (the documentary method), this was an experiment that was conducted with some students by asking them to talk things over (problems etc) with an adviser (whom they could not see as he was concealed behind a screen). They were told it was a Psychotherapy experiment. They were to ask him questions about themselves and he could only answer yes or no. The truth was the adviser just answered yes or no randomly, but the students still read reason into his answers and interpreted them as giving them advice even though the answers were of no context to the questions. The experiment served to show that people do try to make sense / reason out of each others actions even when what they are being told are senseless answers. The policy that EM recommends is that all remarks and descriptions be looked at as themselves 'parts of society'. Most of modern sociology is a mixture of Marxism and Ethnomethodology.

To grasp any of the social sciences you have to be fairly eclectic and draw from a variety of sources... *and also be absolutely bored out of your mind, fed up and with nothing else better to do ☺ ...so...What is Sociology?...well, that depends !*

Bibliography

Thomas Hobbes – Leviathan (1651)

Auguste Comte – (1798)

Herbert Spencer – (1820-1903) Biological Organism Analogy.

Immanuel Kant – (1724-1804) Interpretivists Approach

Alan Dawe – The Two Sociologies (1971).

Emile Durkheim – Suicide (1897).

Talcott Parsons – (1902-1979) Structural Functionalism / Structural Differentiation.

Karl Marx – (1818-1883) The Conflict Theory.

Louis Althusser – (1918-1990) I S A / R S A

Max Weber – (1864-1920)

Alfred Schultz – (1899-1989) Phenomenology

Harold Garfunkel – Ethnomethodology (1967)