

Week 1

- Society is people living together with stable forms of social institutions, legal systems, and a set of social norms and practices
- The dreams and ambitions of men are restricted by their private spheres and the localities of their lives
- Men struggle in a rapidly changing world
- Sociological imagination enables them to make sense of these changes
- Sociological imagination is the relationship between history and biography -- individual lives contribute to society
- A trouble is a private matter that can be resolved privately
- An issue is a public issue threatening some commonly held value
- Sociology investigates the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of ourselves and society
- Social structure -- social contexts of our lives do not consist of random assortments of events or actions; they are structured, or patterned, in distinct ways
- Why does sociology have a vast array of conflicting theories? Because sociology is about our own lives and behaviour and studying ourselves is the most complex and difficult endeavour we can undertake
- Theories involve constructing abstract interpretations that can be used to explain a wide variety of empirical or 'factual' situations.
- Auguste Comte -- the founder of sociology
 - Comte sought to create a science of society that could explain the laws of the social world just as natural science explained the functioning of the physical world
 - He wanted sociology to apply the same rigorous scientific methods to the study of society that physicists and chemists use to study the physical world
 - Positivism holds that science should be concerned only with observable entities that are known directly to experience. On the basis of careful observations, one can infer laws that explain the relationship between the observed phenomena
 - A positivist approach to sociology aims for the production of knowledge about society based on empirical evidence drawn from observation, comparison and experimentation, as opposed to intuition or reason
 - Comte's law of three stages claims that human efforts to understand the world have passed through theological (religious), metaphysical (natural as opposed to supernatural) and positive (scientific) stages
 - He urged the establishment of a 'religion of humanity' that would abandon faith and dogma in favour of a scientific grounding. Sociology would be at the heart of the new religion, providing a new moral consensus that would help to regulate, or hold together, society, despite the new patterns of inequality in the Industrial Revolution
- Emile Durkheim
 - Durkheim saw sociology as a new science that could be used to elucidate traditional philosophical questions by examining them in an empirical manner

- Social life could be analysed as rigorously as objects or events in nature
- Large emphasis on social facts -- aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals, such as the state of the economy or the influence of religion
- Social facts have a coercive power over people, which often goes unrecognised as people believe they are acting by choice
- In studying social facts, Durkheim stressed the importance of abandoning prejudices and ideology
- He was particularly interested in social and moral solidarity - in other words, what holds society together and keeps it from descending into chaos
- Solidarity is maintained when individuals are successfully integrated into social groups and are regulated by a set of shared values and customs
- Traditional cultures with a low division of labour are characterized by mechanical solidarity -- grounded in consensus and similarity of belief
- The forces of industrialization and urbanization, however, led to a growing division of labour that contributed to the breakdown of this form of solidarity
- Societies characterized by organic solidarity are held together by people's economic interdependence and their recognition of the importance of others' contributions -- shared beliefs replaced by mutual dependency
- Order is necessary for social cohesion
- Anomie -- feelings of aimlessness, dread and despair provoked by modern social life and the breakdown of traditional values leading to a loss in purpose
- Suicide -- committed by unintegrated individuals
- Extended Comte's ideas of positivism and paved the way for structural functionalism -- society is a system
- Karl Marx
 - Marx argued that those who own capital (capitalists) form a ruling class, while the mass of the population make up a class of waged workers - a working class / proletariat
 - Capitalism is inherently a class system in which class relations are characterized by conflict -- capitalists exploit workers
 - Materialist conception of history -- social change is prompted primarily by economic influences / conflict between classes
 - Social systems make a transition from one mode of production to another as a result of contradictions in their economies
 - Marx theorized the inevitability of a workers' revolution which would overthrow the capitalist system and usher in a new society of no class difference -- communism
 - Society would no longer be split into a small class that monopolizes economic and political power and the large mass of people who benefit little from the wealth their work creates -- the economic system would come under communal ownership, and a more humane society would be established with more advanced and efficient production

- Instead of understanding the world (like philosophers), we should move to change it
- Alienation -- worker's labour exists outside of him, no connection to his work
- Max Weber
 - Economic factors are important, but ideas and values have just as much impact on social change
 - Religious values were of fundamental importance in creating a capitalistic outlook
 - Unlike other early sociological thinkers, Weber argued that sociology should focus on social action, not social structures
 - Human behaviour shapes social life
 - He did not see, as did Durkheim and Marx, that structures existed external to or independent of individuals
 - Ideal types are conceptual or analytical models that can be used to understand the world -- any situation in the real world can be understood by comparing it to an ideal type
 - Rationalization - the organization of social and economic life according to the principles of efficiency and on the basis of technical knowledge, largely abandoning religion and tradition
 - Disenchantment -- the way in which scientific thinking in the modern world has swept away the forces of sentimentality from the past
 - Bureaucratic domination, although based on rational principles, could crush the human spirit by attempting to regulate all spheres of social life
 - Iron cage of bureaucracy was a manifestation of rationalisation
 - Verstehen -- subjective understanding as opposed to scientific method
- Functionalism
 - Functionalism emphasizes the importance of moral consensus, in maintaining order and stability in society
 - Functionalists regard order and balance as the normal state of society
 - Durkheim argued that religion contributed to social cohesion
 - Manifest functions are those known to, and intended by, the participants in a specific type of social activity. Latent functions are consequences of that activity of which participants are unaware
- Conflict perspectives
 - Conflict theorists reject functionalism's emphasis on consensus, instead highlighting the importance of divisions in society
 - An influential approach within conflict theory is Marxism -- class conflict
 - People have separate different lives and through their difference conflict is bound to arise
 - Functionalism focuses too much on cohesion
- Symbolic interactionism
 - Symbolic interactionism springs from a concern with language and meaning -- language allows us to become self-conscious beings that are aware of our own individuality and able to see ourselves from the outside as others see us

- Virtually all interactions between human individuals involve an exchange of symbols
- Symbolic interactionism directs our attention to the detail of interpersonal interaction and how that detail is used to make sense of what others say and do
- Criticized for ignoring the larger issues of power and structure within society and how they serve to constrain individual action
- Macrosociology is the analysis of large-scale social systems, like the political system or the economic order. It also includes the analysis of long term processes of change, such as the development of industrialism
- The study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction is usually called microsociology
- Macroanalysis is essential if we are to understand the institutional background of daily life
- Micro-studies are in turn necessary for illuminating broad institutional pattern

Week 2

- A theory is an explanation or interpretation that explains some empirical phenomenon (derived from the five senses)
- A theory is an abstraction that can be generalised to other observed sets of phenomena
- Theory is not the same as ideology -- ideology is continued adherence to a theory in spite of new and confounding evidence
- Enlightenment -- questioning of the feudal system, rise of scientific processes
- Herbert Spencer
 - Society evolves from the simplest to the most complex
 - Survival of the fittest -- weak should be left to their own devices
 - Social evolution through structural differentiation (simple societies develop into more complex forms with diverse social institutions) and functional adaptation (the way societies accommodate themselves to their environments)
 - Structural differentiation leads to functional adaptation
- Symbolic interactionism focuses on micro-level interaction and the way in which meanings are constructed and transmitted across the members of society.
- Phenomenology is a second interactionist perspective, which deals with the ways in which social life is actually experienced. It is the systematic study of phenomena; things as they appear in our experience
- Ethnomethodology - the systematic study of the methods used by 'natives' (members of a particular society) to construct their social worlds - is the third interactionist perspective
- The ideas of the classic thinkers - Marx, Durkheim and Weber - were formed during times of great social, political and economic change, which their theories sought to understand. We are now living through a period of global transformation that is probably just as profound and yet is much more widely felt across larger areas of the world. We seem to need new theories to help us understand and explain the new developments that are transforming our societies today
- Marx's work also illustrates the main problem with grand theories - namely the difficulty of subjecting them to empirical testing