

Understanding Society Lecture 1 – What is Sociology (29/2/16)

What is sociology?

- “the **scientific study** of human life, **social groups**, whole **societies**, and the human world as a whole”
- “the systematic study of the ways in which people are affected by, and affect, the social structures and social processes that are associated with the groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and world in which they exist”
- **the ‘sociological imagination’** – how we connect private troubles with public issues – **C. Wright Mills**
- “the **sociologist** is concerned with **understanding society in a disciplined way**” – **Berger, 1963**
- the relationship between history and biography in society
- the capacity to switch from one perspective to another, from small-scale to large-scale and examine the relationship between the two
- “connect private troubles with public issues” – **Mills** (e.g. **private** – a person losing their job, **public** – a rise in the unemployment rate)
- “linking what happens in individual lives to the larger social, political and economic dimension”
- “by drawing on modern sociology’s 200-year history while looking to the future, today’s sociologists have the tools and resources to understand better where we have been, where we are, and, perhaps more importantly, where we are going” (**Ritzer, 2013**)

Understanding Society Lecture 2 – Foundations (3/3/16)

Social capital – resources embedded in social networks (social ties, not social media) e.g. business connections, friendships, family.

Theory – a model that we use to explain something, make sense of things.

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The roots of sociological thinking lie in 19th century Europe. Four of the main thinkers from this period were:

- **Auguste Comte**

Born 1798, invented the term **sociology** to describe the general laws of the social world. Looked at events occurring around him (French Revolution, inequality) and tried to understand **why** they were occurring. By investigating these laws and studying social trends and patterns, Comte believed society could be improved.

Positivism (positive science) – science should be concerned only with observable entities that are known from experience. **Sociology** began as

an attempt to apply the principles of study in physics/chemistry etc. to society.

Law of Three Stages tracks the development of society over time through three stages:

- **Theological** – society is seen as a manifestation of God’s will
- **Metaphysical** – belief in a concrete God is discarded but religion is still seen as the creating force behind society
- **Positive** – scientific examination based on reason and logic (teachings of Galileo, Copernicus etc.)

- **Émile Durkheim**

- Built on a lot of Comte’s ideas that he felt weren’t expressed clearly enough
- Believed sociology should study **social facts** not individual behaviour.
- **‘Social Facts’** – aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals. Social facts are manifested through individuals, but are bigger than any single case.
- Durkheim studied ‘social facts’ with a scientific attitude, to remove preconceptions.
- Analysed social change – **types of solidarity** in relation to the division of labour:

- ✚ **Mechanical Solidarity (Pre-Modern)** – solidarity drawn from **collective consciousness** e.g. feudal society where labour was divided evenly, everyone did a bit of everything

- ✚ **Organic Solidarity (Modern)** – solidarity drawn from **inter-dependence**, specialised occupations with an expanded division of labour. Allows society to be analysed as an organism, made up of separate functioning parts.

Anomie – feelings of aimlessness, dread, and despair caused by modern social life.

Functionalism – the idea that society is a complex system whose different parts work together to create stability and solidarity.

Structural functionalism (Parsons and Merton) – saw society as existing in a state of equilibrium

- **Karl Marx**

- Not a sociologist, but possibly the most influential of the four ‘founders’ of sociology.
- **Materialistic view of society**, where economic and social class-related issues were the most important
- Marx saw Capitalism as a **class system** in which class relations are **characterised by conflict**

- Workers and capitalists are dependent on each other, but it is an unbalanced relationship in which the Proletariat are exploited and alienated. In Marx's view, social change would be prompted by economic influences.
- *"Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. **Working Men of All Countries, Unite!**"*
- Marxism rejects functionalism's ideas of **social equilibrium**, as there are always groups which dominate others (e.g. Bourgeoisie dominating proletariat)
- Modern times – new conflict perspectives emerging as a different way to analyse society – feminist theory, postmodern theory, queer theory, critical theory
- **Max Weber**
 - Focused on social action – influenced by Marx but criticised some of his ideas (**historical materialism**)
 - Believed economic influences were important, but ideas and values also had a bearing on the course of social change
 - *"...the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which the action proceeds and the effects which it produces. By "action" in this definition is meant the human behaviour when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful"*
 - Studied Capitalism, and its origins in **religious values**
 - **Rationalisation** (development of science, modern technology and bureaucracy)
 - Weber was not a functionalist or a conflict theorist, he believed that sociology needed to develop its own methods of studying society, different to that used in the study of individual people and other phenomena.
 - **Symbolic interactionism** – concern with language and symbolism, focus on **interpersonal interactions** in everyday life

Other Historical Sociologists

- **Ibn Khaldun** – wrote *'Muqaddimah'* (1378) calling for a "**science of social organisation**" to explain societal traits
- **Harriet Martineau** – first female sociologist, translated Comte's *'Positive Philosophy'* to English in 1853

Martineau believed in the importance of factoring in issues such as gender, race and ethnicity into the study of social patterns, as well as identifying new issues such as marriage, family relations and race relations.

Sociological Problems vs. Social Problems (From *The Sociological Quest*, Willis, 1999)

- A **sociological problem** is a theoretical query posed by a sociologist, usually driven by curiosity over the origin or functioning of a social phenomenon. E.g. the typical pattern in which people enter an elevator (first person stands by the controls, next stands in the opposite corner, next fill up the other corners and so forth).
- A **social problem** is an observable societal trait which is disrupting the smooth functioning of society, and needs to be rectified. E.g. unemployment, smoking (creating healthcare expenses)

Social and sociological problems are observable at four levels:

- **Individual** – the quality of being a stranger (**Micro**)
- **Community** – quitting smoking (**Meso**)
- **Societal** – national identity (**Meso/Macro**)
- **Global** – economic integration, migration (**Macro**)

Reflexivity – *‘the ability to consider one’s place in the social world, not as an isolated and asocial individual, but as a consequence of one’s experience of the membership of social groups’*

Key sociological questions:

- **What’s happening?**
- **Why?**
- **What are the consequences?**
- **How do you know?**
- **How could it be otherwise?**

Social Construction – sociologists see the social world as not simply based on biology, but built up by historical attitudes to an issue as well as contemporary ideas and practices (e.g. gender roles). Language plays a big part in social construction. Whether a name for a phenomenon exists at all, and how it is defined influences societal perceptions. For example, the term ‘child abuse’ came about in the 1960s to describe physical assault against a child, and only took on a sexual connotation in the 1980s. To an extent, *something can only exist in the social world if it has been socially constructed.*

Structure and System – the concept of social structure expresses the idea that social formations (classes etc.) exist and endure over time, acting as a constraint on people’s lives. As soon as we are born, we are expected to conform to arrangements that dictate the way we can behave. The idea of social structure was imperative to the early *structuralist* sociological perspective, which states that human actions should be analysed not in isolation, but as a product of underlying social structure. This social structure is made up of systems of education, politics, economics, religion, family composition, media and law.

Social Facts – ‘ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion.’ (*Durkheim*, 1938)

Culture - 'the symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society, including language, custom and convention, by which human behaviour can be distinguished from that of other primates' (Abercrombie et al, 1994). Culture influences the **values and norms** seen in a society. Values identify what people are expected to aspire to in life, such as a good education, starting a family, etc. Norms are a translation of values into rules of behaviour, such as not killing other humans or neglecting children. Values and norms are an *abstract* concept not binding rules like laws, and thus people often act in a way that contradicts their values. The study of *why* people act against their values is an important topic of sociological research.