Historical and social context for the development of sociology

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Historical and social context for the development of sociology

This session focuses on the historical and social context for the development of sociology and sociological thinking; therefore, we will provide an outline of how political, industrial and scientific revolutions have had an influence on the development of sociology. This outline will show how sociology emerged from periods of dramatic social change in 18th, 19th and 20th century Europe and North America and briefly consider the impact of social change such as modernisation, industrialisation and rationalisation. The link between social change and the emergence of sociology will be highlighted. This historical and social context also offers the opportunity for you to make connections with other social science subjects you may be studying, for example history, politics, philosophy, and psychology.

Historical context: Modernity, social change and the emergence of sociology

Sociology as a distinct subject emerged in response to two broad sets of changes in the 18th century:

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- Changes in the way people lived – notably the *Industrial Revolution*
- Changes in the way people thought – particularly the rise of the set of ideas known as the *Enlightenment*

The Industrial Revolution, a process begun in England then spread across Europe, changed the way people lived their lives. Work became concentrated in specific places built for that purpose (factories) which led to a split between home and the place of work, leading to people being concentrated in cities.

Concurrently, traditional ideas were challenged *Enlightenment*ideas which saw the rise of science as a method of explanation and as a result the declining importance of religion. The shift from passive subjects of God's will to thinking agents, able to comprehend and master their own world had important political repercussions – the French (1789) and American (1776) Revolutions being the most important results of this new way of thinking. The impact of these events shook the world.

The world was turned upside down. Science replaced religion as the main basis of knowledge, notions of democracy replaced religion and monarchy as the form of government. Industrialisation and urbanisation transformed previously agricultural, rural societies. These developments were collectively seen as the emergence of modern society and modernity.

Intense change led to many asking questions about the implications of these changes for society and the way people lived. People could now understand and participate in the construction and administration of the world – from being objects of the world, to being able to shape their own destiny. What was required was the knowledge to do so. Sociology was to be that knowledge.

Some argued that sociology was required to restore stability to society. Others argued it was needed to ensure future changes to society were made on the basis of informed scientific choices. In either case sociology would play a central role.

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Society and individuals: Contrasting views of early sociologists

Two contrasting reactions by early sociologists were Auguste Comte's sociology as a reforming ideology for the state and Herbert Spencer's notion of society as a marketplace. **Comte (1798-1857)** invented the term 'sociology' and promoted it as the main aspect of his positive philosophy. Comte believed society progressed through a number of stages reflecting the development of human ideas. He argued that an understanding of human society could and should be developed on a scientific basis and used to effect changes beneficial to society.

To avoid the breakdown of social integration, resulting from increasing economic specialisation and the division of labour, the state must perform a central unifying role. To get people to recognise the validity of the state's right to regulate their lives, the state, Comte argued, needed to be supported with a specific intellectual doctrine.

Sociology was therefore assigned a central role in the reconstitution of the notion of community in society, through providing authority for state regulation over society – an authoritarian vision of society, with directions given by sociologists and enforced by the state.

In contrast, **Spencer (1820-1903),** argued that the state was not needed and would stifle individual initiative which was now the basis of economic and societal development. Spencer, drawing upon the ideas of Adam Smith, argued that society was now regulated by the mutual self-interest of individual's and all that was needed was exchange and trade between individuals. Societies would therefore almost automatically stabilise as long as individual self-interest was not stifled.

These contrasting views of the relationship between society and the individuals within it forms the key continuing focus of sociological theory.

Question

Consider the following questions and note down your answers.

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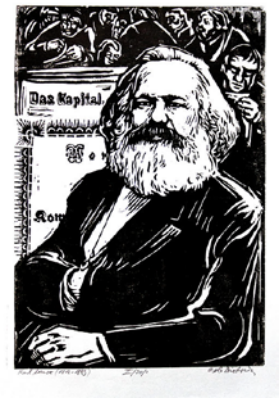
Should we view society as the construction of individuals and therefore interact together to make and remake society, or should we instead see individuals as the product of society and therefore start our analysis at the level of society?

Answer: the reality is that Sociologists adopt a view from both perspectives. Some perspectives (action, micro) see individuals as creating and maintaining society. This is often referred to as a 'bottom-up' model. Others view society as shaping the individual (structure, macro) and constraining or shaping our social lives through the influence of dominant groups and the institutions that oversee social life. This is known as a 'top-down' model.

Sociologists look to the future



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Click here to read more about Karl Marx

Karl Marx, **Emile Durkheim** and **Max Weber** have come to be known as the classical sociological theorists, the founders or shapers of modern sociology. They are the thinkers who pioneered the sociological way of understanding human life in the late 18th and 19th centuries. They were faced with the pressing issue: How to understand the new society (a new industrial economy: the growth of modern capitalism, the growth of cities, political change: control and democracy. The loss of Gemeinschaft; the eclipse of community) that was emerging in Western Europe before our eyes?

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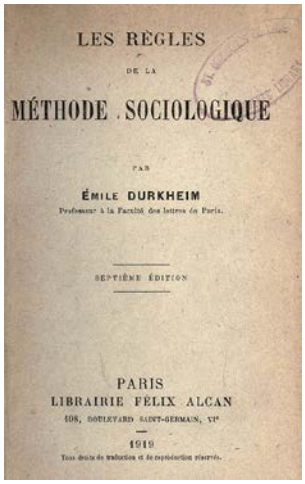
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DE LA
MÉTHODE SOCIOLOGIQUE
PAR
ÉMILE DURKHEIM
Professeur à la Faculté des lettres de Paris.
SEPTIÈME ÉDITION
PARIS
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108, BOULEVARD SAINT-GERMAIN, VIe
1919
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Traditional society, where most lived in the countryside was fast being replaced by a primarily urban, industrialised society, based around factory production, characterised by a rapid growth in the population. The pressing questions included: What was the essence of this new society? How was it going to develop? What problems would it create and what were the best ways of solving them?

'Max Weber 1917' by Guttorm Flatabø from Flickr / (CC BY 2.0)
Click here to read more about Max Weber

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Summary

The answers to the kinds of questions Durkheim, Marx and Weber set out to explore form the starting point for sociological analysis and the backdrop to the ideas they developed in response. The questions they asked and the answers they provided are still relevant today. As Kilminster (1992:153) states:

> ***"One reason we return to Marx is that there is still a class struggle, even though its form has changed. One reason we return to Durkheim is that the problem of solidarity in an individualistic society is still an issue for us. One reason we return to Weber is that power relations continue to proliferate on many other dimensions than the economic."***

Activity

Activity

Click on the links below to familiarise yourself with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber's ideas and writings:

- **Karl Marx:** http://routledgesoc.com/profile/karl-marx
- **Amile Durkeim:** http://routledgesoc.com/profile/%C3%A9mile-durkheim
- **Max Weber:** http://routledgesoc.com/profile/max-weber

References

Kilminster, R. (1992) 'Theory'. In *Developments in Sociology, vol 8*. ed. by Haralambos,M. Ormskirk: Causeway Press

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Contributing authors: David Ness, Julia Moreland, Ken Browne, and Brian Boag

Corresponding author: Julia Moreland

Adapted from Chris Livesey (1995-2017) Sociology Central