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3. Sociology

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3. Sociology

Abstract

Sociology is one of the sciences of human behavior that has grown out of Enlightenment thought. In its present method and theory there is substantially nothing that was not anticipated by gifted seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century thinkers and their intellectual offspring in the Enlightenment tradition. From particular aspects of the grand theoretical syntheses that were characteristic of these centuries, a process of refinement and specialization has produced the sociology of the present day. [*excerpt*]

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Contemporary Civilization, Sociology, Enlightenment

Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XXI: Meaning in the Social Sciences](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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3. Sociology

Sociology is one of the sciences of human behavior that has grown out of Enlightenment thought. In its present method and theory there is substantially nothing that was not anticipated by gifted seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century thinkers and their intellectual offspring in the Enlightenment tradition. From particular aspects of the grand theoretical syntheses that were characteristic of these centuries, a process of refinement and specialization has produced the sociology of the present day.

Sociology is committed to the basic ideas that underlie Enlightenment thought. Among these ideas, five may be mentioned. (1) The universe is knowable. (2) It may be perceived by the observer through use of the scientific method. (3) The universe is orderly. Cause-effect relationships exist among its parts. (4) Cause-effect relationships may be identified and stated as laws or generalizations. (5) Such reliable laws and generalizations become the basis for scientific description, prediction, and control in an orderly universe. Sociologists have adapted this approach to their subject matter -- social interaction in a group. A group consists of two or more persons who are aware of each other, and able to communicate. Social interaction occurs where the behavior of these persons is modified by their mutual awareness. Cause-effect relationships are expressed as generalizations of social behavior, or principles of social structure applicable in all social situations. This is the same reasoning that lay behind Newton's formulation of laws describing universal physical forces, and his seventy-seven general observations on the nature of the physical universe.

In the early nineteenth century, pioneer sociologists erected several grandiose theoretical syntheses in the tradition of the Enlightenment thinkers. Most notable was Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who coined the term "sociology" and applied it to the science of society that he developed. He constructed a hierarchy of the sciences starting with mathematics as a base

* Reprinted from National Income, 1954 edition: A Supplement to the Survey of Current Business (Washington: U. S. Department of Commerce, 1954), pp. 15-18, 20, 24-26.

and ascending through astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology to the "queen" of the sciences, sociology. He was, like other early sociologists, preoccupied with the larger and more generalized social groupings such as societies and states. He considered the family as the unit of structure, the social cell out of which larger groups were built up. As we have seen in Chapter XV, he postulated the growth of societies through three stages: the theological, followed by the metaphysical, and culminating in the scientific or positive. Comte applied the term "positivism" to his scheme of empirical generalizations based upon observations in which the scientific method was avowedly employed.

The "synthetic philosophy" of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was a second noteworthy contribution to theory in the grand manner. It categorized observable phenomena as inorganic (physical), organic (biological), and superorganic (social). It held that the object of observation is primarily the evolution, or progress, of forms from simple to complex. Spencer's theory is an impressive amalgam of evolutionary thought, especially that of English and German physical scientists, biologists, and social philosophers. It incorporated classical economic doctrine and social contract theory. Sociology in this synthesis was the descriptive study of superorganic phenomena.

Much of the theory of Comte, Spencer, and other social theorists of the period has been discarded. But the main lines of their thought influence the interests of present-day sociologists and define the limits of the discipline. Moreover Comte and Spencer remain important as social philosophers in the empiricist tradition. Their influence reaches far beyond the confines of any single social science.

In sociology, theory has always been important not for its own sake, but primarily as the servant and necessary component of sound method. Perhaps the most plausible explanation for the emphasis on method at the expense of theory is historical. Pioneer sociologists appeared in the period of disillusion that followed the French Revolution. The new social order supposedly based on the general or natural laws discovered by Enlightenment thinkers had failed to live up to expectations. At the same time philosophers, biologists, and physical scientists were expanding their concepts to permit more adequate reference to time and change. Faith in the older absolutes was waning. Pluralistic and relativistic concepts at once broader, more complicated, and more cautious, were appearing. Social scientists began to confine themselves to modest, specific, and immediately attainable ends. They turned to more thorough scientific testing before generalizing. Their predictions began to be expressed within degrees of probability. Sociological thought since Comte has reflected all these currents.

A great number of methodological devices, some of them quite simple, have been effectively used in sociological and related types of research. Spencer is representative of early research. He collected accounts of customs and social practices

from all over the world. His sources of information were books and other printed matter, and accounts of travelers, missionaries, colonial officials, and other observers. He classified the facts and used them as bases for his generalizations. Spencer is usually accused of generalizing from insufficient observation, and on the whole this criticism applies to Comte and other early sociologists as well. But the tradition of collecting and classifying data associated with the founders of sociology has resulted in the more refined and systematic observational techniques of the present.

Social anthropology, which often concentrates its study on the customs of simpler social groups, though otherwise it is indistinguishable from sociology, has used the basic method of Spencer. In addition it makes field studies, in which trained anthropologists live for a time with a particular group and gather data. Card files and check lists help the researcher catalog significant items. Oral interviews are noted down. Paintings and sketches, molds, photographs, films, and recordings are often used. By intensive research methods an enormous amount of detailed information has been acquired of the geographical environment, physical characteristics, languages, and customs (or cultural characteristics) of many ethnic groups. With variations of these field techniques, subgroups in the complex higher civilizations are also being successfully studied.

In England and in France similar traditions of social research have been cross-fertilized, in large part by the work of Spencer and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Important descriptive studies and social planning have resulted in both countries. Moreover, numerous studies of colonial peoples in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have also come out of these traditions. In Germany sociology and anthropology have been concerned with research, but the greater concern perhaps has been with theory. The social philosophy of Karl Marx is probably the chief stimulus in the widespread, century-long ferment out of which German sociological theories have emerged. Russian sociologists were influential in the overthrow of the tsarist regime in 1917. But when they insisted that Communist ideology and practice be subjected to objective analysis like any other social phenomenon, their discipline was outlawed. Within the Soviet Union economic and social planning in the past three decades has been accomplished under designations other than sociology. Numerous ethnic studies have been made by anthropologists, especially among Siberian and central Asian natives.

In the United States a series of anthropological studies of American Indians has been in progress for the last eighty years by the Bureau of American Ethnology, as well as by other public and private research groups. There is also a notable attempt to collect, classify, and make available in a single location social and cultural facts from all over the world. This is the Yale Human Relations Area File at New Haven, Connecticut. It has data on 150 human societies, classified and cross-referenced

for ready use. In time it is intended to have complete information on 400 distinct human societies, a ten percent sample of the nearly 4,000 distinct societies that have existed in the world. A ten percent sample will be adequate for statistical analysis, it is thought. The Human Relations Area File supplied much information during World War II on areas and peoples that figured in war operations. The file is open to researchers on a variety of projects in a number of scientific disciplines. Whereas early sociologists erred in generalizing from insufficient data, it is hoped that such devices as the Human Relations Area File will provide enough facts to minimize errors.

Statistical techniques are employed in a great body of sociological research. The training of sociologists must include statistical method. This is not a recent development. As early as the time of Comte the Belgian statistician, Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874), developed the use of statistics in social and population studies. Familiar to any person who reads a newspaper are the simple and widely used measures of central tendency: the mean, median, and mode. These are useful summary figures that compress blocks of unwieldy data into a single number. Sociologists also use statistical measures that grow out of probability theory. Pure or mathematical probability theory makes it possible, in a repeated series of events, to predict the proportion of occurrences of a particular outcome on the basis of chance alone. (The usual illustration of this principle is the toss of a coin in which there is a 50-50 chance of turning up heads, and the same chance of turning up tails.) If a particular outcome cannot be explained by chance alone, then some cause-effect relationship may be assumed and investigated. Through the use of empirical probability theory, sociologists attempt to predict events, not as absolute certainties, but within predetermined margins of error based upon the reliability of the data. Another statistical device is correlation analysis. The technique of correlation analysis enables sociologists to determine whether two or more events occur as the result of cause-effect relationships between them, or because of chance. Statistical sampling is used to obtain data from a small segment of a population. Statistics may determine the reliability of the sample as representative of the whole population from which it is taken. To the sociologist, who cannot set up a controlled laboratory experiment like the chemist or biologist, statistical manipulation, and especially sampling, is believed to serve an identical purpose.

Familiar research devices in sociology and related disciplines are the interview, the schedule or questionnaire, the check list, the case study, and the life history. All are used to improve and to direct the observation of the researcher. Schedules and questionnaires are widely used in contemporary society. College registration blanks, auto driver's permits, insurance policies, and examinations are more common examples of schedules or questionnaires.

Although research by sociologists in the United States

constitutes only a small fraction of the total social science research activity going on at present, this small fraction is significant enough to merit description. Purely sociological research projects number between 1,200 and 1,300 in a year. Most are connected with universities that have sociology departments, or with their research centers. Several recent studies have cost from \$10,000 to \$125,000, though the average expenditure is much less. Research of this type is usually highly organized, involving a staff of workers -- experts, graduate-student researchers, and clerks. Often modern equipment is used, especially when time is limited and funds are available. Such equipment includes printed forms, computing machines, and, not infrequently, key punch, sorting, and filing equipment such as IBM machines. Sources of funds for sociological research are grants from scientific and philanthropic foundations, and to a lesser extent, government, universities, private industry, and private persons. The traditional small-scale project carried out by an individual scholar has declined in the United States, though in Europe sociologists continue to work and to publish on this independent basis.

Sociologists frequently participate in large-scale researches involving several scientific disciplines. In city planning, for instance, services of a team of experts from law, architecture, economics, government, engineering, sociology, and other disciplines may be utilized. Often governments, or international organizations like the World Bank or UNESCO, employ interdisciplinary research teams. Social science research centers exist in fifteen American universities. The largest social research project of all, the United States decennial census, gathers and makes available a wide range of data on aspects of social life that can be expressed quantitatively. Total cost of the 1960 censuses of population, agriculture, and housing was \$124,000,000. Over 170,000 persons gathered data in the field for the three censuses. The data was tabulated by Univac, electronic computing equipment.

In the United States the government employs sociologists directly and in advisory capacities. In addition to the Bureau of the Census, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is notable in this respect. In addition, during World War II, the Defense Department conducted an epochal interdisciplinary research on morale and the American soldier. A sociologist directed the project. The Supreme Court in recent cases connected with its school desegregation rulings set up an advisory board of psychologists and sociologists. The Defense Department's space program has made use of a report and planning guide on technical manpower which a sociologist helped to write.

Nongovernment concerns also finance and rely on social researches in which sociologists participate. Public opinion research is perhaps the most widespread example of this. The American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup Poll) is one permanent organization of this type. The Trendex Poll of audiences of television shows is also an example. Attitude polls on civil

liberties, Communists, social classes, and public housing have been conducted by sociologists since World War II. Industries such as Western Electric have called in teams of researchers to analyze administrative structure and production techniques with a view to improving both. Management and the Worker by Roethlisberger and Dickson is the report of a survey of this sort by a team of Harvard social scientists.

A breakdown of the major fields in which professionally trained sociologists are employed shows in another way the directions the profession has taken. About three-fourths of these persons are associated with colleges and universities. The remaining one-fourth are distributed in government agencies and social work, business and industry, religious, legal, medical or psychiatric agencies, and mass communications.

The strongest possible ties exist between sociology, the college or university, and the teaching profession. Through these connections, it is estimated that one out of ten American students has been enrolled in a course in sociology by the time he is twenty years of age. And nearly all of the 2,000 institutions of higher learning in the country offer such a course.

From the schools in America, especially in the last two decades, has come a body of solid contemporary theory. Harvard is the leading center. Columbia, Yale, and the University of Chicago, among others, also enjoy distinction. On the one hand, this theory is in close touch with the latest developments in current sociological research. There is an earnest and, in many respects, successful effort to coordinate theory with fact. On the other hand, present American theory represents an impressive restatement of ideas of the European pioneers in the discipline. Europe acknowledges American leadership in several ways. Students are sent to America for advanced study. Full recognition is accorded American contributions in professional circles and in the journals. Germany and the United States enjoy especially close ties in this respect. American ideas are often adopted as eagerly in European sociology as in the United States.

The spirit of self-criticism is strong in contemporary sociology. New theories and methods are subject to scrutiny, which often makes them seem tentative and ineffective to laymen or to students looking on from the outside. There is an urgency about social problems. Each person has a personal stake in them. Everyone daily faces recurring problems of adjustment to other people. Family, friends, and associates are only the most intimate figures in a network of vital social relationships. The practical person is eager to seize any workable, plausible device to help him deal with his immediate problems. But this is not the way of science. Long and patient verification must precede the application of its knowledge to practical situations. And sociologists believe this approach must be as applicable to the study of society as it is to physics and biology.

George Homans (1910) is an eminent Harvard sociologist and

historian. His book, The Human Group, quickly attracted attention in America and in Europe upon its publication in 1950. Since then it has generally been considered a landmark of social theory.

Homans has attempted to develop a standard theoretical framework for isolating general laws of social behavior and of social structure. He defines what he considers the basic unit of social structure, the small group. He observes that a small group may be analyzed into persons and their behavior. There are three elements of behavior: (1) activity, what persons do; (2) interaction, activity as it is modified in the presence of other persons in communication and in the give-and-take of action and reaction; and (3) sentiments, the inner, emotional, attitudinal states of persons that predispose them to act in certain ways in given situations.

Behavior is assumed to be the effect produced by three types of causes: (1) the norms, the group's rules of behavior -- customs, traditions, and laws; (2) the external system, the total stimuli of the natural and social environment outside of the small group that involve it in interaction; and (3) the internal system, the mechanisms of group cohesion that keep members performing their proper specialized functions, reminding them of their common identity and cementing the feelings of group solidarity.

Using this conceptual framework as a device for methodical observation, Homans analyzes five different small groups. These include a day shift of production workers in an American industrial plant, a street corner gang in a New England town, a family in a Polynesian island, the society of a disintegrating New England town, and a group of design engineers in an electrical equipment company. From this analysis some sixty generalizations on aspects of social behavior and social structure are formulated. They concern the division of labor and related topics such as leadership, specialization, and formation of social classes; culture, communication, and social control; and group solidarity, equilibrium, and social disintegration and conflict.

It is Homan's suggestion that these generalizations are principles of social behavior that apply across the board in any social situation involving two persons, intermediate-size groupings, or whole societies.

The excerpts from The Human Group that follow include a summary statement of the author's major concepts, and an illustration of their use in a simple situation. An excerpt also includes a summary of the development of sociological thought and a remarkably lucid statement of a sociological perspective on the development of Western Civilization.

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