THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY: SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

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Contents

Summary

Sociology in part attempts to provide a 'scientific' study of all forms of human social life. As such it sees social life as organised across several levels and social domains (forever changing and subject to being changed) and involves:

- People with various social (and biological) characteristics;
- Acting (and in particular interacting) with each other across a wide variety of ways and involving different types of relationship;
- In and through groups;
- Within various spatial or physical locations and time-frames;
- Which are shaped by;
- An array of institutions;
- Set within societal-level entities and 'world systems'.

More particularly, Sociology arose alongside the development of 'modernity' in order to understand modernity and is particularly locked in to the study of modern societies

and tracking their changing characteristics.

Sociology is one of several social science disciplines and smaller bodies of knowledge which seeks to understand the patterns in social life. There is a broad congruence between the objective configurations of social life and the components of the disciplines studying them, the body of sociological knowledge is socially constructed and the pathways to its gaining of knowledge influenced by a variety of factors. Moreover, since social life is ever-changing, sociology often has to scramble to catch-up with the changing social world.

The chapter introduces the theme and shows how social reality and its study interact.

1. Introduction

In this section, the organisation of this theme is reviewed and a theoretical rationale for this way of organising it developed.

This theme essay provides an overview of the history and development of Sociology and also a context within which the other contributions to this theme can sit. Detail provided in the various chapter is not repeated here though. Attention is drawn to the many sources which are available for further consideration of the topics raised here.

Although this theme is concerned with the development of sociology it also covers the current content of sociology. After all, as has been observed: "Sociology was born with a ready-made history" with Comte being simultaneously father of the discipline and father of the history of the discipline. Writing the history of sociology has often been central in its development. More than other social sciences, Sociology has a very strong interest in and orientation towards its own history and developments in sociology often take the form of commentary on earlier sociological work. On the other hand, the depth of historical attention in Sociology is not as great as in other disciplines and usually reaches back no more than a century and a half, whereas historians of political thought – in contrast – study much earlier writers.

Where this Theme differs to some degree from other published histories of the development of Sociology in that it endeavours to avoid being too Euro-centric, and therefore it draws more attention to the global framework within which sociologies have developed. Where possible, too, Sociology is here portrayed as 'sociology-in-use' rather than sociology merely as focused on theory and absorbed in academic reflection.

Sociology spreads across many sub-disciplines and fields, and shares overlap areas with other social science disciplines. Where relevant to telling the more general story of sociology these have been referred to, but the somewhat different contents and trajectories of the changing set of subdivisions of sociology is not systematically addressed in this Theme, let alone in this introduction to it. Subject-matter based specialties are not addressed. Rather, the constituent chapters in this theme provide a range of analytical tools for studying various components of society across a variety of subject-matter areas - or in providing wider frameworks within which such analytical tools can sit.

This introductory essay has two thrusts:

- Developing a picture of social worlds as seen by sociology and then
- Presenting the structure and dynamics of the various theoretical and research traditions developed by sociologists in understanding this social world.

The portrait of the 'sociological landscape' or 'socioscape' serves as a brief overview of the theme as a whole. The second part indicates the ways in which sociological knowledge about 'society' has been constructed and points to issues taken up in more detail in the various constituent chapters of this Theme. But first, some tasters about popular presentation of sociology will be given.

2. The "Sociological Imagination": Popular Faces of Sociology

At various times sociology has presented itself in quite exciting ways which have had particular resonances with the intellectual public. Key 'publics' to which Sociology needs to 'sell' itself include the public generally, and especially the more intellectual sectors of it, students (in a market where there are competing disciplines clamouring to attract students) and perhaps policy makers of a wide range of types who might be interested in supporting sociology. To provide a taster of sociology's promises some of these will be briefly sketched.

Perhaps the most famous is C Wright Mills's term the 'Sociological Imagination' to describe the type of insight which ought to be offered by the discipline of sociology.

The sociological imagination is the capacity to discern the relationship between large-scale social forces and the actions of individuals and includes both the capacity to see relationships between individual biographies and historical change, and the capacity to see how social causation operates in societies.

Another famous discussion of Sociology has been Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* which casts an image of a more whimsical and humanistic curiosity. Berger tasks *sociologists to* "unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other." An example would be: observing how a family really interacts with each other, responds to their environment, etc., behind closed doors without them knowing so that they cannot fake the way they really live, behave and act as a family unit. He denigrates alternative visions of sociologists as

- Social workers (i.e. The practice of helping people)
- As a theoretician for social work
- As a social reformer
- As a gatherer of statistics (and especially as a purveyor of social surveys)
- As a scientist (especially as jargon-ridden law-promulgator)

Instead, he suggests that what drives someone to be a sociologist is that they:

- Are interested in the "doings of men" (especially the commonplace everyday stuff of

life)
− Are excited in the discovery of new social worlds
− Are intrigued to find the "familiar transformed" into more patterned meaning.

A more measured approach is taken by Zygmunt Bauman's view of Sociology as a subversive and liberating discipline. He suggests there are four ways in which sociology can be distinguished from common sense thinking:

− "Sociology … makes an effort to subordinate itself to the rigours rules of responsible speech"
− The size of the field from which sociological thinking is drawn has a much wider horizon
− "Sociology stands in opposition to the particularity of worldviews as it they can unproblematically speak in the name of a general state of affairs" whereas common sense depends on its self-evident character sociology requires **defamiliarization**.

He also suggests there are benefits from studying sociology in that it can render us more sensitive to and tolerant of social diversity.

Finally, in this short listing of examples, Gordon Marshall provided a more study-based introduction, introducing sociology by exploring ten classic empirical studies of British society: on social mobility, poverty, race and the inner city, the Affluent Worker project, sectarianism, education and the working class, clinical depression among women, deviance, families and social networks, and management and new technology.

The way Sociology is first presented to introductory classes has been studied and it is found that claims of scientific status are often made. Another appeal is to the somewhat prurient interest of somewhat innocent (and middle class?) students who are attracted by the vicarious cognitive pleasures of learning about 'nuts, sluts and perverts' which is traditionally offered in Sociology 'social problems' classes. But above all, Sociology can appeal for his revelation of the large-scale structures which work above the limited immediate horizon of people and which show the massive effects on people's lives of large-scale social systems such as social classes and the world systems. Even the more straightforward aggregate effects of demographic structures - such as the worldwide tendency for aging societies – can be revelatory.

But the promise of a sociological perspective is often challenged. Sociology has to compete in the marketplace of ideas. Governments and ruling classes and a range of professional interests may well have competing views on social reality. Cultural and religious and ideological social knowledges may offer other alternatives. Sociologists do not always win such struggles although tendencies towards a 'Knowledge Society' and an increasing call for 'evidence-based' (or at least 'evidence-informed' policy making) provide reassuring support.

3. Classifications of Social Reality

Knowledge about societies is socially constructed and the way it has been developed

over time has differed along several dimensions. Moreover, the object (or subjects) of its study has also changed over time and to some extent social changes have shaped the development of sociological knowledge. Yet to some extent social reality does have an objective structure and the organisation of knowledge about it to a considerable extent reflects that structure. It might seem surprising that these two stories are not the same: that the characteristics of sociology can be 'read' from the characteristics of social reality and vice verse. They are definitely related but are better thought of as two parallel lines. This section, then, attempts an overview sketch of the delineations of social landscape (the 'socio-scape') as usually conceived by sociologists.

In the 1930s in particular, but going back at least to Herbert Spencer's sociology of the middle of the previous century, there had been a sociological fascination with the classification of different sorts of social groups and some interesting classifications had been devised. The high point of social classification came with the schemes of German sociologist Leopold von Wiese's *Systematic Sociology* (translated and augmented by Howard Becker) in the 1930s and Russian/French sociologist Georges Gurvitch in the 1950s. However, one of the effects of American sociologist Talcott Parsons's drive (from the 1930s) to develop (or reconstruct) a solid intellectual foundation for sociology was to scuttle this rather too static classificatory approach. No longer would sociologists attempt to identify new types of social form or play with different classificatory schema in the way that amateur naturalists still observe different forms of flora and fauna. Instead the emphasis has been on examining the social processes – that give rise to such groups. Little sociological attention has returned to the question of whether refined typologies could now be developed based on our (presumably) better knowledge about social processes. But some classifications will be reviewed in this section.

A framework for describing the main features of social life needs to give separate attention to each of the following (which are separately addressed in the following sections):

− Social action and interaction
− Levels, situations, fields, systems
− Domains, Institutional areas
− Social forms – institutions, resources
− Social groups (instantiations of social forms)
− Social categories
− Boundary Conditions
− Societies: a more detailed consideration of this particular level of group

Social Action or Social Interaction:

Sociologists converge in believing that social analysis must be grounded in examination of micro-level situations, although they differ in how they construct these. Certainly these are arenas in which there is meaningful action or behaviour and also interaction amongst social players. Sometimes this is seen in terms of a decision-making model (at the extreme a rational choice model) but other elements are also included such as knowledge, information, beliefs, values etc.) and often analysis is focused on

unintended consequences which go on "behind the actor's back" (that is, without them being particularly aware of it). A pragmatist position is that much 'action' is entirely habitual and even Giddens allows that while there is some 'knowledgeable performance' much action is somewhat unconscious.

Social Levels and Social Domains:

Social life seems to be lived at each of 3 broad levels:

- Micro- level (everyday life, situations etc.),
- Meso- level (e.g. Organisations, communities, social movements etc.) And
- Macro-level (societies as wholes, the world system).

Amongst the founding fathers of Sociology Georges Simmel drew attention to the micro-arenas in which social life was lived, and Max Weber emphasised this level in his more theoretical writings (while abandoning it in more substantive writing in comparative/ historical sociology). This level is more uniquely focused on by sociologists than other social scientists. As sociology developed through the century, especially in its American form, attention became directed towards those social forms which operated at a more meso-level and people were seen as participants in organisations, communities and social categories which are aggregates with less firm social shape.

This set of three levels is used to group the various chapters on different areas of sociology covered in this Theme.

Social life is lived across each of several domains (their number and nature varying by society) including family, work, religion, education, leisure etc. At the broader levels of social organisation these are each institutional areas with their own set of organisations that service them (e.g. churches in relation to religion). Each of these domains (more often sociologists refer to them as 'institutional areas') has its own values and rules and tends to operate as a semi-autonomous field. For example, in most cultures 'sacred' areas and scenes require respectful attitudes and behaviour.

Social Groups:

Social Groups concern the way humans relate to each other and are a collective social form shared amongst those who are members of them. More permanent **groups** of two or more people interact regularly over time; have a sense of identity or belonging and have norms that non-members don't have.

A major distinction is between **temporary** and more ongoing **permanent** groups. Temporary groups are those which almost spontaneously emerge from situations and are referred to as 'collective behaviour'. In public settings (such as streets, gathering places) people usually act as an undifferentiated aggregate broadly governed by collective norms of polite public behaviour. However, temporary gatherings can form and sometimes act collectively. Indeed, there can be a fascination with, and fear of, collective behaviour events. Some sociologists have suggested that there are three forms

of the crowd (corresponding to key forms of emotion):

- The panic (an expression of fear),
- The craze (an expression of joy), and
- The hostile outburst (an expression of anger).

Crowds can be either compact or diffuse. Some diffuse crowds are held together by interaction but others only by the common receipt by its 'members' of messages from the media, and these are sometimes termed 'publics' or 'masses'. A public comes into being when discussion of an issue begins, and ceases to be when it reaches a decision on it, although many are loosely on-going. Through attitude measurements of surveys something of the dynamics of publics can be glimpsed. Collective behaviour often involves events sponsored by more formally established organisations, including social movements; for example a protest gathering designed to create publicity for a particular cause.

There are fairly stable forms of social relationships which are below the threshold of stability required to be seen as a group: e.g. quasi-groups such as social networks. Social networks link various people with varying degrees of intensity and ranges of subject-matters, and often have an on-going albeit very flexible structure.

A **primary group** meets face to face and builds up a high degree of social integration (although severe tensions may simmer beneath the surface): a classic example is a weekly-meeting 'coffee circle' of housewives.

Secondary groups are less face to face. There are many types. Formal organisations (sometimes taking the form of **bureaucracies**) tend to be planned, to be orientated towards the achievement of specified goals, to be organised in a formalised hierarchy of positions and perhaps to be resistant to the changes necessary to adapt their procedures to changing circumstances. A more relaxed type of social structure is a community, where there may be a widely-encompassing community spirit and commitment but with a more limited form of social solidarity underpinning this.

Social movements **are concerned to propel change although themselves may be quite ossified structurally: a**n active movement tries to change society; an expressive one tries to change its own members.

Institutions:

Providing the templates and ideas around which groups and social activities are built are institutions and more generally culture. One distinction which is important is between an **institution** and any particular **organisation** (a distinction often blurred in everyday discussions): the former provides the template for the latter - which in turn can reshuffle the template as its own foundational imagery. Moreover, several organisations (indeed many: take the case of families or business enterprises) can share a single institutional template. Institutions provide values, rules, knowledges and even acceptable emotions to those guided by them.

Social Categories:

People participate in these various social forms as individuals, members of social categories and in more active groupings.

Social categories are socially recognised features of humans that they share with some others and which can be mobilised in interactions with others. Some are biologically 'given' (or available to be built on by being socially recognised): sex/ gender, age, 'race', and other physical appearances and capabilities. Other social category features arise from family backgrounds and also various groups and settings people have been involved with. Perhaps the most important in modern societies are 'social class' and 'ethnicity'. In any society (or its component settings) there is a roster of social background characteristics which are available for people to attach themselves to – in conjunction with the ways other people classify them (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, marital status, occupation, employment status, educational qualifications, group memberships etc.) How people behave and the attitudes they hold will (to some degree) be shaped by the social categories they are members of. Social categories may remain as aggregates of people with similar characteristics, but they can also be drawn on more actively in shaping social activities. In turn, these have been built into social research measurements and, for example, sociologically-informed surveys will include an extensive battery of social characteristics they have (including many which derive from the household they are part of and their family background). Apart from the chapter on feminist sociology, these sociologies based around the analysis of particular social characteristics have not been accorded their own chapters in this Theme.

Boundary Conditions of the Social

There are several areas of phenomena which intrude into the social without themselves normally being seen as entirely 'social':

- Minds/ Personalities
- Bodies
- Physical/Biological Environments (including built environments, technology etc.)
- Assets, Resources etc.

Social life is carried by socially-orientated minds set within biological bodies operating within a physical environment (itself partly natural and partly human-modified). These all impose barriers to social activity at least to some extent and also open up possibilities. For example, interaction in a classroom is partly shaped by the physical shape of the room itself and the degree of alertness of students and teachers affected by the temperature and humidity in the classroom. Sociology is attending more and more to these boundary conditions and is more inclined than before to conceptualise them as part of the social rather than as distinctly apart from it.

Another rather different 'boundary condition' relates to 'animal societies'. Although social relations among humans are more sophisticated as we possess culture and language, nevertheless some animal societies share common features with human societies: for example rank orders ('pecking orders') are common and different species

vary in their life-time mating arrangements. The study of animal social forms is a useful contrast against which to set studies of human societies.

Putting the Analyses to Work

Sociological description (sometimes termed 'sociography') must not be confined to 'setting the scene', but needs to identify the capacities for action of different groupings and how these are affected. At the heart of any social analysis the sociologist needs to identify who the stakeholders are (and these may include categories of people not at all obvious) and what the relationships are amongst these stake-holders, especially in relation to rights accorded one group by another and therefore the pattern of property ownerships, and what the 'interests' of each of these stakeholder categories is.

Theories of Society

Much sociology is concerned with tracking changes in societies and in identifying the emergent characteristics of new features. Often such attempts are blatantly 'commercial' and speculative, snatching trends from mere whiffs of fashion, with the flimsiest verification in terms of factual support. On the other hand the debate over such speculations is important and clearly changes have happened. This is such an important area of sociology that it is worth focusing in on **societies** as a particularly important type of social group. Theoretically, a society is seen as a group which is (at least potentially) self-sustaining since it includes within it the capacity to meet all the requirements necessary for continued survival as a society. (On the other hand, some recent theorists have drawn attention to an over-fixation - termed 'methodological nationalism'- amongst many sociologists at the cost of paying insufficient attention to social phenomena above and below this level of analysis.)

Gerhard Lenski differentiated societies based on their level of technology, communication and economy:

1. Hunters and gatherers,
2. Simple agricultural,
3. Advanced agricultural,
4. Industrial, and
5. Special (e.g. Fishing societies or maritime societies).

A somewhat similar earlier system developed by Morton H. Fried and Elman Service was based on the evolution of social inequality and the role of the state:

- Hunter-gatherer bands (categorization on duties and responsibilities.)
- Tribal societies in which there are some limited instances of social rank and prestige.
- Stratified structures led by chieftains.
- Civilizations, with complex social hierarchies and organized, institutional governments.

In simplified accounts a sequence was often posited: such that Hunter-gatherer tribes

settled around seasonal food stocks to become agrarian villages, and these in turn grew to become towns and cities, and then cities turned into city-states and expanded their territories to become nation-states. However, complexities can emerge along other dimensions than those used in the above typologies, the realities of changes have been more complex and the value judgements involved in suggesting an unproblematic 'progress' have been widely rejected. Higher levels of social organisation can be fragile, susceptible to internal disorder and environmental degradation. Over the course of history, many civilisations have risen and then fallen.

Much sociological attention has been directed at detecting the key features of **modernity** compared to earlier modes of social organisation and there is also much interest in how it might have arisen. Modernity is usually seen as a type or phase of society, initially confined to the last few centuries of the West European countries from the Renaissance and characterized by a larger-scale integration of formerly isolated local communities and a departure from the cultural limitations imposed by 'tradition' and religion toward individualism, rational or scientific organization of society, and egalitarianism.

A particular concern of sociology, the point of many of the contributions of leading theorists, is to identify the key features (or key emerging features) of contemporary society. This is often quite speculative and often empirical research fails to detect anything like the impact claimed by theorists. (It seems that theorists often see the identification of a postulated key change as a crucial game in which there are high stakes for the winner). However, there is some balancing as counter-theories concerning continuities have also been promulgated and there is much debate in sociology about these characteristics.

There are a range of candidates, including:

- Post-fordist industry
- Globalised/ westernised/ europeanised/ americanised
- Global finance capital
- World society
- Consumer society
- Space/time disembedded
- Turbo-capitalism/ speed capitalism
- Mobilities, time-space compression
- Knowledge/ information economy/ society
- Reflexive modernisation
- Risk society/ expert society
- Intimate society
- Network society
- Multicultural society
- Digital culture/ virtual culture/ postmodern
- Secularisation v resurgence of ethnicity and religion; 'clash of civilisations'
- Aging demographies/ extended life-spans

- Neoliberal/ third way/ evidence-based ideologies
- Environmentally susceptible (peak oil/ environmental degradation/global warming etc.)

There is also some debate over whether there is an appropriate label for the current phase of modern society (if indeed it is possible to apply just one label): late/high capitalism is widely preferred (synonyms include liquid modernity, second modernity, re-modernity, etc.). Modern societies are seen as having previously been organised in a successive range of modes: early capitalism was pre-industrial, and later stages have included industrialised and urbanised societies (organised around 'steam' technology) and more recently 'fordist' modes of production which feature highly organised assembly lines and the congruent residential form of suburbia.

Another debate focuses on 'varieties of capitalism' (another variant debate concerns 'different worlds of welfare states') within this increasingly inter-connected broad late/high modern society – as opposed to the more usual assumption of a broad convergence. This literature in particular contrasts the Anglo-Saxon countries (US, Canada, UK and sometimes Australasia) with less neo-liberal Continental Europe (itself often seen as split along Northern Europe v Southern Europe dimensions) and then with forms of 'Asian' capitalism.

An overlapping set of theories focuses on the key characteristics of societies in relation to other types. Post-WW2 theorising saw ex-colonies as striving for modernisation, although other theorists saw them being held back by their dependencies on core economies. More recently Immanuel Wallerstein partially combined these viewpoints in his still hotly-debated 'world systems theory'.

Finally, there is the wider task of classifying (and exploring the linkages amongst) the various (some 200) nation-states across the world. Few particularly sociological versions of more widely accepted (and often economic based) classifications have been developed, and so the typologies adopted vary from a broad **global north/global south** contrast to versions usefully noting the differences between **first, second, third and fourth worlds** to various classifications of developed through developing to **underdeveloped** countries (often using categories employed in the UN system, World Bank etc.). Many such countries are societies only by courtesy, since the capacity and impact of their States is weak and they are diversified across many groupings - often arbitrarily sliced-up historically by imperial powers over a century before.

One debate is often termed 'methodological nationalism' and problematises the extent to which many macro-sociologists unthinkingly assume that societies are coterminous with countries without sufficient recognition of the impact of wider more globalised structures and of the many multi-connections across societies at lower levels.

Evolution of Social Forms

Any particular social organisation changes constantly – at least in small details such as turnover of personnel and adaptation to changing external circumstances. On top of this over time the range of different social forms rises and falls. The pace of social change

seems to have speeded up in particular because there are more technological innovations driving it, although some underlying social realities remain the same.

One consequence of shifting social realities is that sociology may well need to continuously retool itself theoretically and in terms of research methods in order to be 'up to speed' in its ability to investigate current circumstances. This is an issue which is hard to adjudicate on, as the whole conundrum is complex. Certainly, continuing adaptation in both needs to be considered (and there is evidence from the development of sociology that appropriate adaptation to changing social realities has taken place).

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