

Classical Sociological Theory
Professor. R. Santhosh
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 01
Sociology: An Overview

Welcome to this session, and I have titled this session as Sociology: An Overview. In this session, I will provide a very broad overview of the discipline. You must be knowing that providing an overview or a summary of the discipline in a single session is almost impossible. So, I would be trying to provide a rather broad argument about the character and nature of the discipline, its important development and major players of the discipline.

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- A systematic study of patterned social relations (social interaction) through empirical investigation and critical analysis
- A long past but a short history
- Emerged as a modern social science in the 18th and 19th century Europe
- Pre-modern sociologists/sociological thinking- Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the Arab philosopher of history, a statesman, a judge and an historian. His book *Muqaddimah*.
- The idea of '*asabiyyah*', "social cohesion



Sociology is widely defined as a systematic study of the patterned social relations, or in other words, social interaction through empirical investigations and critical analysis. So, what does this particular definition mean? It actually talks about a particular and the systematic way of understanding, the way in which society functions with a specific focus on the subject matter, which is defined as the patterned social relations or in other words, defined as social interaction.

And how is this study done? This study is done through empirical investigation and critical analysis. We will come back to these terms later in more detail because the idea of empirical investigation and critical analysis deserve much more elaborate description.

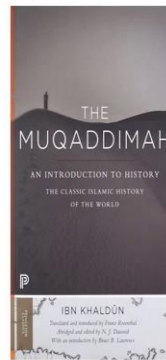
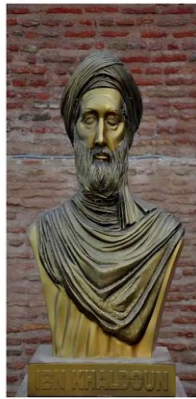
Now, this particular tendency of looking at society in a systematic critical view, is it something new? Or is it not been something that began since human civilization. This is a very important question. So, in the case of sociology, mostly it is said that sociology has a long past, but has a very short history. It is considered to be a modern social science that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. But as we just discussed, the kind of a critical and systematic understanding about society and this particular way of looking at society goes back much earlier in history.

So, we need to look into this debate very briefly. There are arguments that even before the emergence of sociology in a very systematic manner in Europe or the way we understand in the contemporary society as the emergence of modern sociology, we had very important scholars and thinkers in different countries, in different ages, who provided some very fascinating understandings about sociology, about society. Do we call them sociologists? May not be.

However, they were some of the important forerunners who provide very fascinating insights about the way in which they understood society during their time. One of the important scholars of the pre modern times is Ibn Khaldun, a Tunisian scholar who lived between 1332 and 1406. He was a philosopher of history, he was a statesman, he was a judge, and he was a historian. And his book, the Muqaddimah is widely considered by quite a lot of important scholars as an example of a pre modern sociological understanding of society.

So in this work, Ibn Khaldun elaborates a concept titled “asabiyyah”, and if you roughly translate asabiyyah, it means the idea of ‘social cohesion’. So what is ‘social cohesion’? Social cohesion is something that actually binds the society together, some kind of a force or some kind of a spirit that binds society together, something that provides a sense of ‘we’ feeling to the society. So he uses this concept to understand, to explain, to examine his own society, the tribal society, the more agrarian society and that is a very interesting and fascinating discussion in his work.

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So, you might be interested to see the pictures of Ibn Khaldun and the book, so I have got the pictures. On your left, it is the bust of Ibn Khaldun and the book is also there, The Muqaddimah.

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The word *sociology* (or "*sociologie*") is derived from Latin word *socius* means companion/society and the Greek word *lógos* means knowledge/science

Systematic development and institutionalization of sociology in Europe especially in France and Germany

The first formal Department of Sociology in the world was established at the University of Chicago in 1892, and the journal *American Journal of Sociology* was founded shortly thereafter in 1895



Now, coming to the word, sociology. Where did the term sociology emerge from? The word sociology is derived from the Latin word 'socius', which means companion or society and the Greek word 'logos', which means knowledge or science. We now come back to recent times, where sociology emerged as an institutionalized discipline with its own theoretical as well as methodological platforms.

So, the systematic development and institutionalization of sociology happened in Europe, especially in the countries of France and Germany, even though we have thinkers from other countries such as Britain and Italy who contributed for the growth of this particular discipline.

The first formal Department of Sociology in the world was established at the University of Chicago in 1892, and the first journal, the American Journal of sociology was founded in 1895. You must be knowing that the journal is something important in the career of a particular discipline because journals carry some of the most recent researches and advancements in the knowledge system of every discipline.

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Classical sociological thinkers: Montesque, August Comte, Herbert Spence, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Wilfredo Pareto, George Simmel, Ferdinand Tonnies



Development as a positivist science and later development of anti-positivism including phenomenology

Three major theoretical traditions:

Structural Functionalism

Conflict Theory

Symbolic Interactionism



Who are the important scholars who laid the foundations for this particular discipline? We come to understand the discipline basically through the writings of these people. So, it is extremely important to understand the theoretical contributions of these people. There is a long list of names starting with Montesque, August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Wilfredo Pareto, George Simmel, Ferdinand Tonnies and others.

We may not go through all these scholars in detail, but some of the scholars especially, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber are of profound importance, and we will go through their work in great detail. If you look into the countries of their origin, you will see that most of them are from France and Germany, and one of them, Herbert Spencer is from England and Wilfredo Pareto from Italy.

Methodologically speaking in terms of the scientific orientation, sociology actually developed as a positivist science and later developed an anti-positivist twist which later led to the emergence of phenomenology. These terms might look rather strange; we will come back to them in detail. But basically, this is an extremely important point to remember that, sociology emerged as a positive science, and later it developed an anti-positivist strand, and later phenomenological influence became very apparent.

There are three major theoretical traditions; structural functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactions. So, what do I mean by this term major theoretical traditions? We will discuss this in the coming classes that sociology as a discipline provides a particular perspective to understand the knowledge. So, in other words, sociology as a discipline has a particular take; it has a particular perspective and has a particular point of view to understand society. But within that, sociology does not have a singular theoretical orientation, and rather there are multiple competing theoretical orientations for this discipline.

Each of these theoretical orientations or theoretical strands, provide different and distinct understanding about the society. So, within the discipline of sociology, you have competing divergent theoretical traditions. So, it is important to understand the ideological basis, the epistemological basis of each of these traditions and the kind of methodology that emerged from there. So in that sense, we have these three theoretical traditions; structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

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Decline of structural functionalism since 1960s and the growth of multiple theoretical perspectives including structuralism and post-structural theories

Influence of a wide variety of intellectual currents including feminism, postcolonialism, Orientalism, poststructuralism and so on

Emergence of globalization and reformulation of sociology- both theoretical as well as methodological challenges



Structural functionalism as a major theoretical perspective began to decline after the 1960s. After that, there are a number of other theoretical strands which became important in the trajectory of sociology like the influence of a wide variety of intellectual currents, including feminism, postcolonialism, and orientalism, poststructuralism and so on. So, these developments which are very recent in times, maybe for the last four or five decades, are something very important as they thoroughly reshaped the orientation and the nature of sociological inquiry and its theoretical basis as well as methodological orientations.

One of the most recent developments is the emergence of globalization. There are very critical arguments that sociology as a discipline needs to be reoriented or needs to reinvent itself in order to understand the kind of changes happening as a part of globalization. So, there are arguments that sociology needs to develop a new set of theories, a new set of methodological practices, in order to understand and comprehend the kind of changes happening in a globalizing world. I am not going into the details, but this debate is something very important.

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Sociological analysis of virtually every field of human society



Major themes include: social stratification, social class, social mobility, religion, secularization, power, law, sexuality, gender, caste, race, economy, consumption, globalization....

Methodological formulations in consonant with the specific theoretical frameworks. Connections between ontology, epistemology, research methodology and research methods.

Qualitative as well as quantitative methods: Survey, analysis of data sets, interview schedules, focused group interviews, participant and non-participant observation, textual and content analysis, discourse analysis, network analysis, internet ethnography and so on



Now, if you ask me, what is the subject matter of sociology? Or what does sociology study? This is a rather difficult question because sociology studies almost every aspect of human society, and there could be nothing that is left which is not being studied by sociology. So, it studies some of the very important themes that define our social life. I have given a lengthy list of terms and the moment you try to understand the importance of these terms and discourses in our everyday life; you will realize that how important and central these terms are in deciding the social nature of our society.

It includes social stratification, the way in which how society is stratified into separate groups, about social class, the whole question of economic inequality and social mobility, the whole idea of people able to move upward or downward in a vertical or horizontal manner and then the question of religion, one of the very important topics of our current time.

It also includes the question of secularization, again a very central theme in the discussion of sociology, then the question of power, another fascinating theory, very closely connected with political science. Then, the question of law, question of sexuality, gender and caste, especially in the Indian context. I think sociology is the most important discipline in India which has studied caste so systematically. No other discipline can claim to be having produced so much of knowledge about caste, as compared to the discipline of sociology.

The question of race in the western society and question of economy, consumption and globalization are also important subjects of sociological inquiry. So, almost every aspect of social life is being studied by sociology in a very systematic manner. Then, another very important point that we need to keep in mind is that the kind of a methodology that this discipline employs is very closely connected with its theoretical premises. So, there is a very strong connection between the kind of methodology that somebody uses and the kind of larger theoretical frame he or she uses to understand the society.

The Methodology does not stand in isolation, or the research method or methodology cannot be adopted as something independent of the theory. Therefore, there is a very important methodological formulation in consonant with the specific theoretical framework. Then, there is also a very important connection between the questions of ontology, the questions regarding the whole question of what is that? And the questions of epistemology, the questions related to the questions of knowing, how somebody knows that, and the question of knowledge, about epistemology and research methodology and research methods.

So, this is an extremely important topic, for which we will have a very brief discussion in the coming classes, but we may not go deeper into that. But I want to highlight the point that the type of research that you do, the type of research tools that you employ, the kind of research methods that you adopt, has to be informed by the larger theoretical framework that you adopt because there is a very specific connection between the ontology, the epistemology, methodology and the research methods.

Then, it also uses a series of both qualitative as well as quantitative research methods, and they include a long list. They include survey, the input analysis of data sets, interview schedules, focus group interviews, participant and non-participant observations, textual and content analysis, discourse analysis, network analysis, internet ethnography, and so on. So, each of these research methods or the very specific method that you use to collect data is again decided on the basis of your understanding of what constitute social data and how do we get hold of that.

Each of these questions is influenced or shaped by our larger understanding of the theoretical framework that we adopt. So, for example, take survey and analysis of data sets and interview schedule, these are widely used as a part of quantitative research methods, where statistical tools are used to analyse and then, they are used to reach a certain kind of conclusion. Whereas, almost all the latter part after including the focus group interviews and the rest of these methods are widely considered as qualitative, because they try to understand the data mostly in the form of information which cannot be converted into numbers.

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Widely used by

Academics

Politicians

Bureaucrats

Policy makers

Corporates



Now, who are the people who use sociology widely or who are the beneficiaries of sociology? Again, the list is very long. We have academics, people like you and me who study society for an academic degree or to generate more knowledge about the society, the people who study society in a scientific and in a systematic manner. The academics constitute a very important section of people who use sociology and sociology is one of the most important social sciences widely, widely offered across universities and colleges all over the world.

Then there are politicians, and you might be interested to see how politicians make use of sociology. Yes, politicians also make use of sociological analysis and understanding in order to understand how the society functions, how specific groups such as caste groups or race groups or other kinds of groups function in a particular society in terms of their voting behaviour, in terms of their socio-economic locations, like they were middle class or upper class, their class orientation, or their caste orientation or their specific ideological orientations. All these information are very important for the politicians as well.

Especially in modern day politics, politicians make use of each of this information very carefully. Another important set of beneficiaries or people who make use of sociology are bureaucrats, who are basically entrusted with the task of framing policies. Because the data generated by sociologists by doing research work or by collecting data from the field has very specific policy implications, this data is very important for bureaucrats to devise various plans for certain welfare measures, or to reformulate specific government policies and even to implement a host of developmental as well as bureaucratic aspects.

Policymakers in larger realms, people who are concerned with larger policy decisions and even corporates make use of sociological research. Corporates constitute a very important group of people who make use of sociology, especially corporates and companies who look into the consumption pattern, consumption pattern of huge population, how do they consume, what do they consume, what are their preferences.

And also a number of new emerging corporates, invest huge amount of money in understanding how people behave with respect to, for example, how people make use of technology in specific forms, how people use mobile phones, or how people use social media platform. In this age of artificial intelligence, this amount of data and the kind of sociological insights that are derived from this information is something very important for corporates.

So, in that sense, sociology is an important discipline, which offers a very fascinating understanding of society. It has a very interesting history. It emerged in a specific historical context in Europe and it is now spread across the globe. It is being widely taught across the educational institutions, and it offers a very fascinating and interesting understanding of the society around one's own life.

More importantly, it offers very interesting insights about one's own life, the way we live in this world, the kind of choices that we are making, the kind of freedom that we are

experiencing, and the kind of unfreedom that we will be able to negotiate, if we carefully go through the kind of social processes that are around us. So, we will conclude this session here, and we will meet you for the next class. Thank you.