

The beginning of modernity in europe sociology essay



Modernity, began in Europe, but yet it affected every nation in the West and, to some degree, all the nations of the world. The transition from traditional medieval society to modernity is easy to identify. The Enlightenment brought about a period of change. God was no longer thought to be at the centre of the universe, there was a move from agriculture to industry which saw three revolutions signalling the advent of modernity in the forms of the industrial revolution in England 1780-1840 the democratic revolutions of the United States of America in 1776 and France in 1789 and the “ The scientific revolution” (1500-1700). Capitalism became the predominant economic force and sociological concept of modernity is therefore associated with industrialization, urbanization, secularization, bureaucracy and progress.

Kramnick, Isaac. “ Thematic Essay: Political and Social Thought of the Enlightenment,” Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopaedia 2009

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Essentially, the English and French revolutions were significantly different. The nature of the Industrial Revolution within England provided the people with an ideal towards greater freedom and cultural expression, as consumerism began to dominate society. France on the other hand, was more visibly concerned with the issue of religion than England was. Medieval Europe thought the authority was the word of God and was revealed through the teachings of the Roman church. The enlightenment challenged this whilst accepting new ideas of religion, myth and tradition thus helping create a new faith through knowledge and reason. The enlightenment ushered a period of uncertainty for religion in Europe, and Christianity in particular was

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criticised by the enlightenment writers. One theory that gained wide attention in the enlightenment suggested that religion was 'the invention of cultic leaders or priests, whose prime consideration was the furtherance of their own interests' (Yolton et al 1996: 447). Yolton, J et al (1996) Enlightenment (Blackwell)

Galileo was in fact imprisoned and nearly killed because of his beliefs and theories that questioned the traditional ideas and attitudes of the church. In order to escape Galileo had to swallow his pride and admit he was wrong, even though he knew his was correct. Although the philosophers involved in the enlightenment continued to believe in God, the findings they made meant the basis of knowledge was no longer seen as the word of God as the church believed, as described by Hamilton in his book 'The Enlightenment and the Birth of Social Science (1992: 55-56). "For the first time man could dare know about the social arrangements under which he lived, rather than have them presented to him through the obscuring haze of a religious ideology. By knowing about these social arrangements their operation would become clear and thus open to change." In other words the enlightenment leads to science and natural philosophy replacing religion as the means of knowledge.

"During the enlightenment faith in divine revelation, and the authority of the Church, were increasingly undermined by the new confidence in the ability of human reason to provide an understanding of the world. Similarly, the understanding of history as the chronicle of the fall of man from God's grace, with spiritual salvation only attainable in the next world, was largely replaced by a belief in human perfectibility and the increasing faith in man's power
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and ability to use his new-found knowledge to improve mankind's state".

(Badham 1986: 79) Badham (1986) Theories of Industrial Society

Enlightenment brought about a cultural change in what creates knowledge and what the purpose of knowledge is. After the enlightenment, history was no longer seen as 'synonymous with God working his purpose out.' (Smart, 1992, Pg8) Smart, B (1992) Modern Conditions, Postmodern Controversies (Routledge) Power of human reason was now used to create knowledge. The enlightenment period challenged sources of authority dramatically, never before had people dare question the word of church until this time, and the enlightenment brought about a great deal of change in the way people perceived the world.

The idea of a 'social contract' is another important feature of the Enlightenment. The central concept in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought is 'liberty' and most of his works deal with the mechanisms through which humans are forced to give up their liberty. . This issue which Rousseau confronted most of his life is summed up in the first sentence of his most famous work, The Social Contract:

"Man is born free but everywhere in chains." (Rousseau (1762), 1973: 165).

Rousseau, J. J ([1762] 1973) The Social Contract, Everyman

The liberals welcomed the dramatic changes because individuals are naturally rational and should be able to pursue their own interests, the removal of traditional restraints and the emergence of governments which guaranteed the rights of the individual were therefore seen as progressive developments. For socialists this did not go far enough, human beings are <https://assignbuster.com/the-beginning-of-modernity-in-europe-sociology-essay/>

naturally sociable and their needs can only be met collectively, this necessitates the replacement for capitalism which divides people by socialism which enables them to cooperate. On the other hand to these two optimistic responses to social change, conservatives exhibited horror; human beings are naturally a member of a social organism, unequal but depending on each other. These revolutions in their disregard for tradition and their rupture of the natural order were seen as dangerous developments.

The three most commonly mentioned sociological perspectives are Functionalism, which is a system theory. Marxism which is often seen as a conflict theory and in addition there is also Social Action Theory. August Comte, Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons are known as the three best-known Functionalists. When you look into the Social Action Theory you come across many articles by Max Weber, who is one of the earliest known Social Actionist and George Herbert Mead. Very few sociologists actually write about Marxism other than Karl Marx himself.

Functionalism is a theoretical perspective based on the notion that social events can be best explained in terms of the functions they perform, that is the contributions they make to the continuity of society. Moreover, they view society as a complex system whose various parts work in relationship to each other in a way that needs to be understood. (Giddens 4th Edition, 2001, page 689). Functionalism is based on a systems theory. The ideas behind the perspective are that our behaviour is governed and constrained by social forces. In other words, we are what we are because of the social groups that we belong to. Functionalists see society as a system based upon the same lines as the human body. The analysis used to describe functionalism is often <https://assignbuster.com/the-beginning-of-modernity-in-europe-sociology-essay/>

compared to the working of the human body. Therefore, if you describe how the human body works, you can compare society to the same system. Each part of the body i. e. the heart/family, lungs/workplace and brain/government, have a particular job to fulfil within the overall system. However, you need them to be working in conjunction for the system to work properly. In a similar way it is the contribution we make within our society, which enable us to flourish. The various parts of the society, such as the family or religion must be seen in relation to society as a whole. (Haalambos and Halborn, 5th Edition, 2001, page 9)

The term ' sociology was coined by a French man named Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in 1838. He wanted to understand the great social changes that had occurred around him and made the earliest contribution to the development of sociological thinking. He set about devising a ' science of sociology'. A science in the manner set down by the scientist and philosophers of the Enlightenment. He believed that the methods used in the natural sciences could be applied to the study of society, thus Comte was a proponent of Positivism, defined as ' an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond' (Bryman, A, 2004: 542). Bryman A. (2004) Social Research Methods, New York: Oxford University Press Comte has particular prominence given to him because his thinking reflected the turbulent times of his age and also because he coined the word sociology in other to be different from other thinkers. He was a French man who noticed that the French revolution had introduced significant changes into the society and he also sought to explain and create a science of the society that

could explain the social laws of the world just as science explained the laws of the physical world. He argued that the society conforms to the invariable laws in much the same way that the physical world does. His law of three stages claims that the human efforts to understand the world have passed through the theological and metaphysical and positive stages. He was keenly aware of the state of the society that he lived. He was concerned with the inequalities being produced by industrialization and the threat they posed to social cohesion. In his view, the long term solution was the production of moral consensus that would help to regulate or hold the society together. His visions for the society were never realized, his contribution to systemizing and unifying the science of society.

Another Key thinker is Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), He did draw on many aspects of Comte's Work but he believed that Comte's ideas were too "speculative and vague and that Comte had not successfully carried out his programme" (Giddens, 2001: 8). Giddens, A. (2001) sociology (4th edition), Cambridge: polity Durkheim did believe that social life could be studied with the same objectivity as the natural world and he developed the concept of social facts, which should be studied by sociologists; "social facts are aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals, such as the state of economy or the influence of religion" (Giddens, 2001: 9). Giddens, A. (2001) sociology (4th edition), Cambridge: polity for him his main intellectual concern of sociology is the study of social facts. He stated that the aspects of social life shape our actions as individuals, such as the state of the economy or the influence of religion. However, he conceded that social facts are difficult to study because they are invisible and intangible and they cannot

be observed directly. He instead states that they must be revealed indirectly which is by analyzing their effects or by considering attempts that have been made at their expression, such as laws, religious texts or written rules of conduct. He was concerned with the changes that were transforming society in his own lifetime. He was particularly interested in social and moral solidarity; this was in other words what held the society together and held it from descending into chaos. He stated that there are two types of solidarity and he contrasted them together, mechanical and organic, relating them to the division of labour and the growth and distinctions between the different occupations. However, the forces of industrialization and urbanization led to a growing division of labour that contributed to the breakdown of solidarity.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) Marx's ideas were strikingly different from that of Comte's and Durkheim. Marx ideas were inspired by the industrial revolution and argued that the system of capitalism affected human experience. He focused on conflicts between the classes, and the need for substantial social change to a communist society. His political activities brought him into conflict with the German authorities, after a brief stay in France, he settled permanently in exile in Britain. He however witnessed the growth of factories and the inequalities that resulted. His viewpoints were grounded in what he called the materialist conception of history. According to this view, it is not ideas or values human beings hold that are the main sources of social change. Rather social change is prompted primarily by the economic influences. He believed in the inevitability of a workers revolution which would overthrow the capitalist system and usher in a new society in which there would be no classes, the rich and the poor. Marx gave names to

the haves and have nots, they are known as the Bourgeoise and the Proletariats. One way of assessing the power of the upper class is through the study of elites (people who fill the top positions in each of the major institutions of society); most of the sociological debates have centered on economic elites and political elites. (Sociology in focus 5th Edition, 2000, page 53) They differ from functionalists in the way that they see the difference. He did not mean that inequalities would disappear; he rather stated that society would no longer be split into a small class that monopolizes economic and political power and the large mass of people who benefit little from the wealth their work creates. He believed that in the society of the future production would be more advanced and efficient than production under capitalism. Karl Marx is quoted as saying ideology is a distortion of reality, it binds members of society to the contradictions and conflicts of interest that are built into their society's. (Haralambos and Holborn, 5th Edition, 2002, page 13)

Max Weber (1864-1920) was influenced by Marx, but saw class conflict as less significant and believed that ideas and values had as much impact on social change. He developed the idea of 'ideal types', which are "conceptual and analytical models that can be used to understand the world". Weber made use of ideal types in his writing on forms of bureaucracy and the market. He therefore simply cannot be labelled a sociologist as his interest and concerns ranged across many areas. He was born in Germany where he spent most of his academic career. He was most concerned with the development of modern capitalism and the ways in which modern society was different from earlier forms of social organization. In common

with thinkers of his time, he sought to understand the nature and causes of social change; he was influenced by Marx but was also critical of some of his views. He saw class conflict as less significant than Marx. He believed that sociology should focus on social action, not structures; he argued that human motivation and ideas were the forces behind change. According to him, individuals have the free will to act and shape their future.

Social Action Theory is often described as the alternative theory. Social Actionists see people as individuals who have a right to react as and how they wish. They say that how we react with each other in our society is largely up to us as individual social being. It is a social perspective that focuses on the meaning and intentions that underpin human actions. Social active perspectives are concerned with the way in which the human actively and creatively interprets the world around them. Rather than the external forces which could be used as a guide (Giddens 4th Edition, 2001, page 698)

It is worth pointing out here that sociology did not become the institutionalised and professional discipline that we know today until the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. As Jenkins puts it 'Comte first gave it a name and Marx sketched out some of its most enduring ideas...sociology as we know it today was established...by Weber, Simmel, Durkheim and Mead' (Jenkins, 2002: 21). Jenkins R. (2002) foundations of sociology, Basingstoke: Palgrave

The enlightenment period is often referred to as the 'age of reason'. The enlightenment influenced people lives a great deal, and without this period, the world would not be how it is today. It enabled people to have the right to

express their views freely and publicly without the fear of being imprisoned or even killed.