

The history of theories of sociology



Many theorists state that the development of 19th century sociology was the response to the dramatic social change of the time. The social upheaval caused by Enlightenment, and the Industrial and French revolutions caused social theorists to develop sociology as a method of explaining, analysing and understanding the social upheaval following these events. Sociology could explain the reasons behind increasing public discontent with traditional values, aristocracy and religion, and also sought to understand and rationalize new societies that subsequently emerged. The nineteenth century was also the century in which sociology would become recognised as an academic discipline.

Sociology is defined as ‘ The study of human social life, groups and societies (Giddens, 1989).’ French philosopher Auguste Comte (Waters and Crook, 1993) coined the term; he considered sociology the ‘ final stage in the historical development of ideas (Babbie, 2002).’ Sociology involves describing and analysing how forces, such as social, political, economic and cultural arrangements shape and, influence behaviour and, the impact they have on individual identity construction (van Krieken et al. 2000). Sociology then, has society as its subject matter (Najman and Western, 2000).

The assertion that sociological theory arose in the 19th century as an attempt to explain social change can be examined by assessing the influence of historical events, occurring immediately before, during and following briefly that century, had on the development of sociology. The Enlightenment, and the French and Industrial revolutions prompted sociologists to query or challenge the social, economic and political

composition of the time. Berger (1970) stated that sociology evolved through the need for understanding the confusion that followed these events.

The French revolution began in 1789 as the result of political and social unrest. The underlying factors that influenced the revolution were the corruption of the ruling government regime that led to worker impoverishment. Additionally, to the extortion of taxes from the peasantry and, the hierarchies insistence that they and, the religious sectors remain the owners of political power. This insistence prompted the public to revolt against the ruling regime and the clergy (Giddens, 1997: 6-7), the result was the expulsion of the Bourbon monarchy and the establishment of the first republic. The religious sector also suffered with the overthrow of the Divine Rights of Kings, which previously formed the crux of religious belief during this period (van Krieken et al, 2000: 23). The sweeping changes that resulted from the French revolution impacted upon the emergence of sociology because there became a sudden need for intellectual awareness in order to cope with the ramifications of the changes that had taken place (Berger, 1970: 55).

The second transformation to occur during the period was the Industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century. This revolution began in Britain and subsequently ‘ spread throughout Western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century (Giddens, 1997: 7).’ The Industrial revolution was a time of massive technological change, before this people had simply produced their own forms of sustenance by way of the barter system or living off of the land (Bilton et al, 1996: 33). They were now faced with rapid movement from traditional rural areas to urban areas due to a need to

obtain employment and earn a wage to survive. Sustaining their previous lifestyles was no longer possible (van Krieken et al, 2000: 23).

Sudden urbanisation brought on by the revolution lead to changes in living and working conditions. There was a decline in the number of workers and a reduction in adequate living conditions. Unequal income distribution followed, due to the mass production of goods required to obtain a surplus that could support the lagging economies. The social and political upheaval created by the industrial revolution heavily influenced the work of earlier sociological thinker Karl Marx. Marx believed that under capitalism society would be divided into two classes, the ruling class who owned the means of production (bourgeoisie) and the workers or the oppressed who would be forced to sell their labour (proletariat) (Grabb, 1984: 20-21). The result according to Marx is the exploitation of the workforce by the bourgeoisie through the modes of production (Crompton, 1998: 27). In turn Marx believed this would lead to what he called the 'alienation' of the workforce, where workers would become disenchanted and no longer be able to derive any pride or satisfaction from their work (Grabb, 1984: 24). This revolution spawned some of the most influential sociological work in history. The impact of sociology's emergence in the nineteenth century because of social change is no more evident than in Marx's class analysis.

The social forces that lead to the two revolutions provided the context in which sociology would emerge and prosper during the nineteenth century, as a means for understanding the new societies that were being created (Waters and Crook, 1993: 7). A further social movement that influenced sociology's emergence was Enlightenment.

Enlightenment not only helped to influence the French and Industrial revolutions it was simultaneously influenced by them. Enlightenment was a period during the eighteenth century that was committed to the rise of human knowledge and rationality in evaluating society (Waters and Crook, 1993). During this period, there was an increase in the belief in science that sought to challenge traditions and more specifically religion. The objective was to replace them with rational and scientific principles (van Krieken et al, 2000: 23). Sociologists such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim believed that the changes, which heralded modernity, would make religion obsolete (Giddens, 1997: 349). This belief in secularisation made it possible for people to pursue a belief in science and to seek the solution to societies perils through the application and progress of human knowledge (Bilton et al, 1996: 37). The idea that sociology was a science based on the same principles as the natural sciences led to the appearance of positivism. Positivism brought with it a way to apply the methodology used in the natural sciences to the study of society (Haralambos et al, 1996: 17). The two revolutions and Enlightenment signaled the arrival of modernity and with this newfound existence came a need to understand these events and the impact they would have in the future (Giddens, 1997: 7). Thus, sociology was finally gaining academic legitimacy.

Sociology was not recognised as an academic discipline until the late nineteenth, early twentieth century (van Kneken et al. 2000: 24). Two of the founding fathers Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are credited with transforming the study into an academic discipline. Before being recognised as a legitimate field of study, sociology was practiced outside of the

academic realm (van Krieken et al. 2000: 24). In part, sociology was made an academic discipline because people expected that this newly discovered insight could help explain why society changed during the great transformation and could advise on how to improve it (van Krieken et al, 2000: 24). The late inception of sociology as an academic discipline may be one of the reasons that sociologists argue that its appearance in the nineteenth century was the result of social forces prevailing at the time. The assertion that sociology appeared in the nineteenth century due to the social forces prevailing at the time is also evident when comparing structuralism favoured during modernity to post modernism.

Although sociology is already an established academic discipline in contemporary societies, current social forces are still transforming it in the same way that it was created to explain and understand them. The structuralist perspective that developed during sociology's initial stages presumed that individuals were the product of their social world, with fixed identities and a universal set of norms and values (van Krieken et al. 2000: 22). Structuralism seeks to explain human actions as being produced by social structures.

This is in stark contrast to post modern theorists who believe that people shape their own lives and whilst social structures do play a part in an individuals life chances they are by-no means the sole determinant. Post modernists believe that people are able to create and control their own lives (by way of free will and alternative lifestyle choices) more extensively than their earlier counterparts (van Krieken et al, 2000: 22).

The notion of positivism that was so widely advocated during Enlightenment has fallen by the way in contemporary sociology. Academics in the discipline now believe that human beings cannot be studied in the same way as the natural sciences because the complexities of sociological framework and findings cannot be understood in comparison with the natural sciences (Giddens, 1989: 17). Durkheim's idea that sociology should not be concerned with an individual's subjective interpretation of society (van Krieken et al, 2000: 24) has given way to an avid interest in how people perceive their social world. Moreover, the meanings they attach to that world. A concept known as interpretivism (Bilton et al, 1996: 494).

Traditionally, structuralist sociology addressed economic issues and how they affected society; this has changed in the post-modern era because of other movements that have formed. For example, the feminist movement, which led to a shift in sociological thought from the economic aspects to analysing how cultural aspects impact on society (van Krieken et al, 2000: 28). Postmodern sociological thought has also had to contend with prevailing social forces. Increasing globalisation has produced a need for understanding how and why various forms of consumerism and, consumption have influenced not only society but also, how they create and affect popular culture. Additionally to understand how the growing interaction between the markets and ideals of other countries, influence our own society (van Krieken et al, 2000: 28-29).

A further aspect of the change from structuralism to postmodernism is the fact that contemporary sociology does not focus purely on social forces. Rather it is also concerned with how individuals construct their identities.

Post modernism does not assume that identities are fixed. Nor does it assume that there is a single set of norms or values present in contemporary society. Social factors are no longer considered the only issues that shape, an individuals life chances, there are broader issues of a biological and psychological nature that are central to a persons identity construction (Bilton et al, 1996: 7-17). The agency or free will aspect of an individuals life facilitates greater choice in life direction. Traditional notions of marriage, sex roles, religiosity, conceptions of gender and family have changed and are specific to the individual (van Krieken et al, 2000: 22).

The comparison between structuralist sociology and postmodern sociology illustrates that sociology as a discipline has evolved from its initial form because of contemporary social forces that have materialised. The comparison attempts to demonstrate not only how social forces have changed sociology over time but. It allso shows how social forces prevailing in the centuries leading up to the nineteenth century could account for the emergence of sociology during this period.

Anthony Giddens (1989: 25) suggests ‘ that sociology emerged as a distinct intellectual endeavour with the early development of modern industrialized societies, and the study of such societies remains its principle concern.’

Thus, sociology continues to survive for the same reasons it emerged, to analyse and explain social phenomena.

In summary, there are numerous reasons that sociologists argue that the appearance of sociology in the nineteenth century was itself a result of social forces prevailing at the time. The majority of which can be traced back to the

French and Industrial revolutions, Enlightenment, and sociology's acceptance as an academic discipline. Sociology gained momentum during this period as an intellectual alternative to explain the struggles that were taking place in the French revolution. To explain how and why the changes during the Industrial revolution occurred and the affect they would have. These revolutions along with Enlightenment hit society with such force and resulting turmoil that even today they remain firmly entrenched in discussions about the origins of sociology. Sociology found its place among this turmoil by way of the awareness it could provide in analysing and evaluating the new societies that were being formed.

The argument that sociology appeared in the nineteenth century because of social forces prevailing at the time gains further legitimacy when considering that it was not accepted into the academic sphere until this period. The social, political and economic upheaval generated between the 17th and 19th centuries accounts for the appearance of sociology largely because it was thrust into prominence during this time and subsequently gained notoriety as an academic discipline.