

The development of sociology in the age of enlightenment



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Modern sociology originated out of a season of rapid, accelerated change in Europe, which was characterised by radical revolutions in philosophy, science, politics and society, and included the period known as the Enlightenment. In this essay I will focus on the Enlightenment and discuss the key ideas of this movement. Prior to the Enlightenment, the social structure of society had been dominated by the feudal system, which divided the population into three classes whose status was determined largely based on the ownership of land (eds.

Gieben & Hall 1992, p. 32). The population was restricted in its thinking by the church, which controlled information. Any autonomous thought which contradicted the traditional view of the church was labelled as blasphemous, a crime for which one could receive the death penalty.

The proponents of the intellectual movement known as the enlightenment, directly challenged the existing social structure and the antiquated religious ideas that permeated society. A new mode of thinking was sweeping through Europe and the philosophes argued that reason and rational thought should hold sway over superstitious religious belief, they held that everything should be evaluated by experience and scientific method, rather than accepted by faith (eds. Gieben & Hall 1992, p. 21). This emphasis on experiment and science was seen to be the key factor in advancing human knowledge, and moreover, these principles which were seen to be at work in the natural world could also be applied across all facets of human life, with consistent and reliable results as the overarching natural laws were considered to be immutable.

Subsequently, in confronting the superstitions instilled in society, and “rejecting the authority of tradition, the philosophes wanted people to break with beliefs and institutions that did not meet the test of reason and common sense and to seek new guideposts... unhindered by passion, superstition, dogma, and authority” (Perry, 2009, P. 248). These ideals brought to the forefront the importance of the individual in society, and highlighted the notion that man is self sufficient, his mind, at birth, as John Locke (1632-1704) had said, is a blank sheet, poised to reflect what experience writes upon it, therefore individual reason should not be subject to the dictates of a higher authority. Furthermore, it should not be incumbent upon man to conform to a specific belief or tradition against his will (Andres, 2008, p.

11); nor should he be subject to unjust rule. Rousseau stated, “the person of the meanest citizen is as sacred and inviolable as that of the first magistrate” (1762/2008, p. 92). He dismisses the notion that political authority is found in nature, suggesting that the only natural form of authority lies in the relationship between a father and his child, and therefore the relationship between citizen and authority should be based on a social contract (1762/2008, p.

99). Humanity then, in the context of a life freed from the shackles of the oppressive regimes of Church and Monarch, would be free to advance and to experience a new level of happiness and well being. In this essay, we have examined the key ideas of the Enlightenment movement, and observed a society that was in the process of advancing into the modern era, as it broke down the traditional structures of Monarchy and Church. We have witnessed <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-sociology-in-the-age-of-enlightenment/>

a new understanding of the importance of the individual and the emancipation of a society in bondage, not by the use of force, but by the application of scientific process and in the replacement of superstitious belief with rational thinking.