

# The importance of pre-modern society



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Human history can be divided into three phases: pre-modern, modern and post modern. There is no definite beginning or end to each of these phases; rather they merge into one another, as not all societies moved forward at the same time.

Although most industrialised countries are now considered post modern, a large proportion of the Third World remains modern or in some cases pre-modern. Pre- Modern is the period in society which came prior to Modernity, which began in Europe after the introduction of Industrial society and large scale production.

Sociology and modernity are closely intertwined, but it has also been argued that sociology is actually a product of modernity. During this piece I will examine pre- modern society and discuss some of the reasons why the study of this era is important for sociology.

## **What is Pre- modern Society?**

The pre-modern era spans from before history and can be separated into two phases, before and after settled agriculture. Before settled agriculture, society lives off the land, hunting and gathering. An example of a hunter-gatherer society that exists today is the Arctic foragers, who occupy the circumpolar region of the earth. Due to the lack of vegetation in this area of the world, most Arctic foragers are forced to live on a diet of meat. Many Arctic people are extremely mobile like the feudal societies of pre- modern times.

**Pre-modern society:**

The term 'pre-modern', covers a number of different societal forms: hunter-gatherer, agrarian, horticultural, pastoral and non-industrial. Pre-modern social forms have now virtually disappeared, although they are still in existence in some of today's societies, therefore 'pre-modern' cannot be defined in terms of historical development.

In this respect, pre-modern societies can be characterised by a combination of economic, political and cultural circumstances.

In pre-modern society, work was not highly specialised and the number of roles necessary to produce things were relatively small, therefore the division of labour was simple when compared to modern societies. Most of the labour forces engaged in agricultural activity and produced food through subsistence farming. The majority of pre-industrial groups had standards of living not much above survival, meaning that most of the population were focused on producing only enough goods for means of survival.

The rise of settled agricultural villages meant the build up of storable produce, which represented a cultural advance for civilisation. With the development of storage, in some rare cases came some social unrest, as what could be stored could also be stolen. It should be noted here that in pre-modern times there was very little deviance, as communities were extremely close knit and everybody knew each other.

Pre-Modern society was a time without class distinctions and people shared the same sense of values. In Pre-Modern times, a person's sense of purpose was expressed through a faith. Religious officials held the positions of power

within the communities and were the intermediaries to the general masses. The population of pre-modern times saw God as the main entity and those closest to him, for example the religious officials, were seen as the community leaders. Persons in pre-modern society did not see themselves as having an individual identity rather a group identity. Social life in pre-modern society also often had religion at its core. Villages were divided into parishes and the observance of religion took place at a community level.

In post modern society, the influence of religion appears to have lessened, although it formed the basis for modern penal laws, which regulate human behaviour like religion did in pre-modern times.

### **Industrialisation and the making of Modern Society:**

In order to understand why the study of pre-modern times is vital to sociology, it is important to look to the Industrial Revolution, as this was a time of great change for European society, and the crossing over from pre-modern to modern society.

Industrialisation is the process whereby social and economic change transforms a pre-industrial society into an industrial one. Industrialisation also introduces a form of philosophical change, where people take a different attitude towards their perception of nature.

During the Industrial revolution, an economy based on manual labour was replaced by one taken over by industry and the manufacture of machinery. Rapid industrialisation cost many craft workers their jobs and scores of weavers also found themselves unemployed as they could not compete with machinery. Many unemployed workers turned their anger towards the

machines that had taken their jobs and began destroying factories and machinery.

These activists became known as Luddites and became extremely popular. The British government took drastic measures against the Luddites using the army to protect the factories.

The Industrial Revolution saw the emergence of class, urbanisation and the bad conditions in which people had to live and work in. Marxism essentially began as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. As the Industrial Revolution progressed so did the gap between class structures. According to Karl Marx, industrialisation polarised society into the bourgeoisie, and the much larger proletariat.

Ordinary working people found increased opportunity for employment in the mills and factories and in some cases had no choice but to move to the towns and cities in search of work. By the early 1900's up to eighty per cent of the population of Britain lived in urban centres (Kumar, 1978, cited in Bilton et al, p. 28).

Using the clock to time one's self, as a basis of social organisation, was an indicator of the emergence of a modern society. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both agricultural and manufacturing labour became set by the clock in a way that was very different to pre-modern production. In pre-modern times factors such as hours of daylight set work rhythms, whereas the factories were regulated by the clock, labour was synchronised and took place for a certain number of hours each day and on particular days of the week. For the factory owners and their employees, time now equalled

money. The working conditions were often strict with long working hours and a pace that was set by machinery and production.

With the Industrial Revolution came an increase in population. Education was still limited and therefore children were expected to work. Child labour was appealing to employers as it was cheaper than employing an adult yet productivity was similar. The machines did not require strength to operate and there were no experienced adult labourers as the system was completely new.

By the eighteenth century there was only around thirty percent of the population who engaged in agricultural activity, this enables us to gain some idea of the nature of modern society and the economic changes that took place as modern society developed.

The majority of ordinary people were greatly affected by capitalism and industrial production. By the late 1900's England's Black Country was one of the most industrialised parts of the United Kingdom and in the 1830's was described in the following way;

“ The earth seems to have turned inside out.... The coal.... is blazing on the surface... by day and by night the country is flowing with fire, and the smoke of the ironworks hangs over it. There is a rumbling and clanking of iron forges and rolling mills. Workmen covered in smut, and with fierce white eyes, are seen moving amongst the glowing iron and dull thud of the forge-hammers.”

(Jennings, 1985 p. 165)

**Conclusion:**

The transition from pre- modernity into modernity was important for sociology as people began to see that society was something important to study. Some argue that this was when sociology began as the emergence of modern societies created a new intellectual world aware of its surroundings and concerned with acquisition of knowledge.

“ Sociology is concerned with the study of human societies.... a society is a cluster, or a system of institutionalised modes of conduct.... sociology has as its main focus the study of institutions of the advanced or the industrialised societies and of the conditions of transformation of those institutions”.

(Giddens 1982)

As modernity took form, changes in social attitudes within society occurred making society itself interesting to others. Unlike the static pre- modern society, modern societies appear to have created many different groups, causing new and interesting interactions between people. In the pre- modern era, relationships between people in society were extremely similar and perhaps uneventful and society had been static, therefore sociology was not required.