What Is Sociology? Essay, Research Paper

What is Sociology?

This article is designed primarily for those who are completely new to sociology and would like some help and guidance as to the exact nature of the subject-matter of sociology.

However new you are to sociology it is probable that you have an idea, however vague and general, regarding what sociology is supposed to be about. It may be that you have an idea that sociology is ‘about’ people. And you would be right to think so. We might start then by noting that sociology is one of the human sciences and as such it is a subject to be distinguished from the so-called ‘physical sciences’. Sociology is the study of humanity.

However this description of sociology is only partially correct. To say that sociology is about people and humanity is not enough to distinguish it from the other subjects in the human sciences. For it is equally the case that Psychology, Social Policy, Economics and Social History, amongst others, are all in some sense about people and humanity. Thus the fact that sociology is about people and humanity gets us only part way along the road to a full definition of the subject.

We might also suggest that sociology is ‘about’ society. This helps in so far as it adds another component to our full definition.

But again it is not enough to fully define the subject. For all of the aforementioned human sciences are not only about people and humanity but about society too.

Sociology is also concerned with human culture. A provisional definition of culture used by sociologists is that of ‘ a way of life’. Sociology has always concerned itself with the study of culture and this would fit in with what we already know about sociology; namely it the study of people in society.

Many have suggested that we can define sociology as the subject that deals with and explains social interaction. Here sociology is characterised by the fact that it examines the informal and formal social relationships engaged in by individuals. Sociologists might typically observe and explain types of interactions which take place between individuals. So to include this idea of social interaction in any definition of sociology is helpful.

However the inclusion of social interaction does not establish sociology’s distinctiveness when it is considered alongside, for example psychology. Psychology, just like sociology, also involves the study of human interaction.

There may be a way of differentiating sociology. We could suggest that whereas Psychology studies human interaction of individuals; sociology studies the interaction that occurs within and between social groups. In this sense sociology would be described as a subject that places individuals in their social context as members of social groups, communities and as members of social institutions such as work or their place within a family or again their position within an educational institution. Psychology on the other hand appears to examine individuals as solitary and somewhat isolated beings. Indeed one might formalise the differences of approach by suggesting that psychology takes as its starting point the individual whereas sociology begins with the idea of the wider social networks and societies within which individuals are to be found.

This idea falls in nicely with the widespread perception of sociology as being a subject which takes ‘the wider context’ or ‘the wider picture’ into account and seeks to place individuals into that wider social framework.

We have done well thus far: We have begun to distinguish sociology as a social science, furthermore we have already amassed a number of key terms associated with sociology.

So far we have a number of components of a definition:

Human/Humanity

Individuals

Interaction

People

Social Groups

Society.

We have also noted a number of key ideas within sociology:

Culture

Community

Education

Family

Social Institution

Social Network

Work

But as if to exasperate you let me again ask you to consider that what we have at the moment is very useful indeed but that it is still inadequate and for at least two reasons: Social Psychology, a specialism within Psychology, does study social groups. Furthermore a social science such as Political Science does seek to contextualise the (largely political) relationships of human interaction.

We might alternatively propose that sociology is the study of the external relations which individuals engage in. That is the relationship with other people as well the relationships individuals have with social institutions. Whereas Psychology examines the internal workings of the individual in terms of their mental processes. But again there are aspects of psychology which examine external relations whilst there are aspects of sociology which examine the ‘internal’ workings of individuals’ minds.

In one sense we might have to admit here that Psychology and Sociology experience significant and sufficient overlaps so as to conclude that they are so close that we cannot finally distinguish them in any complete sense. Many have taken this view of the relationship between psychology and sociology and it is not unreasonable position to take. But I feel it not only leaves us with a partial definition of sociology (and by implication with a partial definition of Psychology) but it also means that we are left with a distorted understanding of what has been sociology’s main objective since it’s beginnings in the early years of the 19th century.

For it seems to me that sociology is to be defined as the ’study of social order’. Sociology is a subject made up of competing theories on society. All the differing theories within sociology are best described as basically involved in the project of describing and explaining ’social order’. In other words sociology has always sought to understand how the components of society, the social relationships and the social institutions, contribute to, or deflect from the continued existence of ’society’. This is not to suggest that sociology is not concerned with social conflict and social change too. However these concerns are essentially one’s which derive from, and supplement, the major objective of understanding social order.

When & How did Sociology begin?

If we cast an eye back historically to the very beginnings of sociology we can note a number of important features associated with the ‘birth’ of the subject.

Firstly it can be argued that sociology is a development of, as well as a reaction to, two significant events which occurred in 18th century Europe:

The first of these events was ‘The Enlightenment’. ‘The Enlightenment’ was a revolution in ideas. Briefly put, it had two centres in the European cities of Edinburgh in Scotland and Paris in France. Philosphers and social theorists of the period were seeking to change the way we understood humanity. They were seeking to overthrow the dogma of the Church and in particular of the clerics and to devise an alternative view of humanity based upon rational thinking and empirically based sciences.

It is clear that some of these thinkers were what we might now judge to be ’sociologists’, men like Adam Ferguson and Comte De Montequeiue; women such as Mary Wollstonecraft. But sociology proper was to arrive later.

For the term ’sociology’ is not coined until after the second great event of the 18th century; the French Revolution. For the French Revolution, had shaken not just France and the rest of Europe to its foundations, but North America too. The old absolutist Monarchies were either overthrown or seriously under threat as new classes appeared on the political stage and demanded democratic representation and citizens Rights. A new set of ideologies, of nationalism, appeared to force the pace of social change.

‘Sociology’ arrives in the wake of these two events. The term ’sociology’ is coined by a man named Auguste De Comte. He is conventionally understood to be the first ‘proper’ sociologist. Along with his countryman Henri Saint-Simon they set about devising a ’science of society’. A ’science’ in the manner set down by the scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment. One leading Enlightenment philosopher had been Immanuel Kant. This German philosopher had issued the proclamation that still to this day defines the principal objective of the Enlightenment: ‘Dare to Know’! Briefly put Kant had defined the role of the philosopher as ‘investigator’ (compare this view with that of the British philosopher, John Locke, who, a hundred years earlier had defined the role of the philosopher as an ‘underlabourer’ (to the scientist).

Comte and Saint-Simon ‘dared to know’ about this entity; ’society’. But, and this is a controversial point, their ‘daring-ness’ (!) was somewhat constrained by the contexts in which they lived as well as the social interests they saw themselves as representing. Robert Nisbet, a 20th century North American sociologist, describes them as seeking to assist with the ‘conservative reaction’ then dominant in post-revolutionary France by developing a plan or schema for a well ordered society. Nisbet suggests that Comte and Saint-Simon were acting as ’spokespersons’ for the new industrial classes whose main objective was stability.

Sociology doesn’t ‘get going’ however as the institutionalised and professional discipline that we know today until the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. And this is an extremely uneven and gradual process. It begins in France largely through the efforts of one of the so-called ‘founding fathers’ of sociology Emile Durkheim. It spreads to the then new nation of Germany largely through the efforts of other ‘founding fathers’ such as Max Weber and to a lesser extent Georg Simmel. And all the time this new sociology is, as it were, ‘looking over its shoulder’ or to put it as the philosopher, Jacques Derrida, might; this new subject of sociology was ‘haunted’ by another type of explanation of society: The social theory of Marxism! The Canadian sociologist Irving Zeitlin once put forward the thesis that mainstream sociology has, ever since its early days, been in ‘debate with the ghost of Marx’. Karl Marx had earlier in the 19th century developed a rigorous social theory of human society. He had rejected the idea of sociology and rejected the idea of regarding himself as a sociologist. Yet it is testimony to the force and pervasiveness of his arguments that sociology has sought to incorporate his theory as part of the ’sociological tradition’ and he is now seen as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the subject.

Sociology then is co-extensive with modern industrial society. Just when modern societies emerge so too does sociology. We might take time here to note here that this means sociology had very particular beginnings and reflected particular sets of interests.

Point 1: We saw that sociology’s beginnings were distinctly European. This has led to the criticism that sociology is ethnocentric. There were black writers in the 19th century such as W.B. Du Bois, but they are only now being accepted for their true value.

Point 2: Did you notice all the ‘founding mothers’? No? Nor did I! Again there is a criticism that sociology is a male enterprise which has for a long time failed to give adequate consideration to women’s needs and issues.

This has led to charges of it being ethnocentric. Furthermore it is significant that sociology is a male enterprise from its very beginnings.

So sociology had its beginnings as a white, male, middle-class and European enterprise. If you are going to study it is up to you to determine the extent to which it has ‘mended it ways’.

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