

# Part 1

## What is Sociology?

Sociology is an engrossing subject because it concerns our own lives as human beings. All humans are social – we could not develop as children, or exist as adults, without having social ties to others. Society is thus the very condition of human existence. At the same time, as the opening reading in the book emphasizes, we all actively shape the society in which we live. As sociologists, we seek to understand both how, as individuals, all of us are influenced by the wider society, and at the same time how we actively structure that society in our own actions. More than most other intellectual endeavours, sociology presumes the use of disciplined imagination. Imagination, because the sociologist must distance her- or himself from the here and now in order to grasp how societies have changed in the past and what potential transformations lie in store; discipline, because the creative ability of the imagination has to be restrained by conceptual and empirical rigour.

C. Wright Mills's discussion of the sociological imagination (Reading 2) has long been the classic discussion of these issues. We cannot understand ourselves as individuals, Mills emphasizes, unless we grasp the involvement of our own biography with the historical development of social institutions. On the other hand, we cannot comprehend the nature of those institutions unless we understand how they are organized in and through individual action. It is the business of sociology to analyse the social orders which constrain our behaviour, but at the same time to acknowledge that we actively make our own history.

These ideas are echoed by Zygmunt Bauman (Reading 3). The focus of his discussion, however, is the similarities and differences between sociology and common-sense understandings of social life. Sociology, he agrees with Mills, teaches us to see our own individual experiences in relation to wider social systems, as well as to broad patterns of social change. As such, it is a distinctive way of thinking about the social world. Studying human social activity, Bauman says, is different from analysing objects or events in the natural world. We are all in some sense knowledgeable and skilful in respect of our participation in day-to-day social activity. Sociological knowledge builds upon the practical forms of knowing by means of which we organize our everyday lives. Sociological concepts, however, need to be more clearly formulated and precise than those of ordinary language.

Sociological investigation ranges over much broader arenas, in time as well as in space, than the immediate settings of interaction with which we are most familiar in the daily round. Moreover, sociologists focus attention upon unintended and unanticipated consequences of human activity, whereas in ordinary activities we concern ourselves mainly with the intentions and emotions of other people. As Mills also stresses, sociological thought must take an imaginative leap beyond the familiar, and the sociologist must be prepared to look behind the routine activities in which much of our mundane life is enmeshed.



# 1 The Scope of Sociology

*Anthony Giddens*

Sociology is a subject with a curiously mixed reputation. On the one hand, it is associated by many people with the fomenting of rebellion, a stimulus to revolt. Even though they may have only a vague notion of what topics are studied in sociology, they somehow associate sociology with subversion, with the shrill demands of unkempt student militants. On the other hand, quite a different view of the subject is often entertained – perhaps more commonly than the first – by individuals who have had some direct acquaintance with it in schools and universities. This is that in fact it is rather a dull and uninformative enterprise, which far from propelling its students towards the barricades is more likely to bore them to death with platitudes. Sociology, in this guise, assumes the dry mantle of a science, but not one that proves as enlightening as the natural sciences upon which its practitioners wish to model it.

I think that those who have taken the second reaction to sociology have a good deal of right on their side. Sociology has been conceived of by many of its proponents – even the bulk of them – in such a way that commonplace assertions are disguised in a pseudo-scientific language. The conception that sociology belongs to the natural sciences, and hence should slavishly try to copy their procedures and objectives, is a mistaken one. Its lay critics, in some considerable degree at least, are quite correct to be sceptical of the attainments of sociology thus presented.

My intention in this [discussion] will be to associate sociology with the first type of view rather than the second. By this I do not mean to connect sociology with a sort of irrational

lashing-out at all that most of the population hold to be good and proper ways of behaviour. But I do want to defend the view that sociology, understood in the manner in which I shall describe it, necessarily has a subversive quality. Its subversive or critical character, however [. . .], does not carry with it (or should not do so) the implication that it is an intellectually disreputable enterprise. On the contrary, it is exactly because sociology deals with problems of such pressing interest to us all (or should do so), problems which are the objects of major controversies and conflicts in society itself, that it has this character. However kempt or otherwise student radicals, or any other radicals, may be, there do exist broad connections between the impulses that stir them to action and a sociological awareness. This is not [. . .] because sociologists directly preach revolt; it is because the study of sociology, appropriately understood, [. . .] demonstrates how fundamental are the social questions that have to be faced in today's world. Everyone is to some extent aware of these questions, but the study of sociology helps bring them into much sharper focus. Sociology cannot remain a purely academic subject, if 'academic' means a disinterested and remote scholarly pursuit, followed solely within the enclosed walls of the university.

Sociology is not a subject that comes neatly gift-wrapped, making no demands except that its contents be unpacked. Like all the social sciences – under which label one can also include, among other disciplines, anthropology, economics and history – sociology is an inherently controversial endeavour. That is to say, it is characterized by

continuing disputes about its very nature. But this is not a weakness, although it has seemed such to many of those who call themselves professional ‘sociologists’, and also to many others on the outside, who are distressed that there are numerous vying conceptions of how the subject-matter of sociology should be approached or analysed. Those who are upset by the persistent character of sociological debates, and a frequent lack of consensus about how to resolve them, usually feel that this is a sign of the immaturity of the subject. They want sociology to be like a natural science, and to generate a similar apparatus of universal laws to those which they see natural science as having discovered and validated. But [. . .] it is a mistake to suppose that sociology should be modelled too closely on the natural sciences, or to imagine that a natural science of society is either feasible or desirable. To say this, I should emphasize, does not mean that the methods and objectives of the natural sciences are wholly irrelevant to the study of human social behaviour. Sociology deals with a factually observable subject-matter, depends upon empirical research, and involves attempts to formulate theories and generalizations that will make sense of facts. But human beings are not the same as material objects in nature; studying our own behaviour is necessarily entirely different in some very important ways from studying natural phenomena.

The development of sociology, and its current concerns, have to be grasped in the context of changes that have created the modern world. We live in an age of massive social transformation. In the space of only something like two centuries a sweeping set of social changes, which have hastened rather than lessened their pace today, have occurred. These changes, emanating originally from Western Europe, are now global in their impact. They have all but totally dissolved the forms of social organization in which humankind had lived for thousands of years of its previous history. Their core is to be found in what some have described as the ‘two great revolutions’ of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The

first is the French revolution of 1789, both a specific set of events and a symbol of political transformations in our era. For the 1789 revolution was quite different from rebellions of previous times. Peasants had sometimes rebelled against their feudal masters, for example, but generally in an attempt to remove specific individuals from power, or to secure reductions in prices or taxes. In the French revolution (to which we can bracket, with some reservations, the anti-colonial revolution in North America in 1776) for the first time in history there took place the overall dissolution of a social order by a movement guided by purely secular ideals – universal liberty and equality. If the ideals of the revolutionaries have scarcely been fully realized even now, they created a climate of political change that has proved one of the dynamic forces of contemporary history. There are few states in the world today that are not proclaimed by their rulers to be ‘democracies’, whatever their actual political complexion may be. This is something altogether novel in human history. It is true that there have been other republics, most especially those of Classical Greece and Rome. But these were themselves rare instances; and in each case those who formed the ‘citizens’ were a minority of the population, the majority of whom were slaves or others without the prerogatives of the select groups of citizenry.

The second ‘great revolution’ was the so-called ‘industrial revolution’, usually traced to Britain in the late eighteenth century, and spreading in the nineteenth century throughout Western Europe and the United States. The industrial revolution is sometimes presented merely as a set of technical innovations: especially the harnessing of steam power to manufacturing production and the introduction of novel forms of machinery activated by such sources of power. But these technical inventions were only part of a very much broader set of social and economic changes. The most important of these was the migration of the mass of the labour force from the land into the constantly expanding sectors of industrial work, a process which also eventually led to the widespread

mechanization of agrarian production. This same process promoted an expansion of cities upon a scale again previously unwitnessed in history. [. . .]

Sociology came into being as those caught up in the initial series of changes brought about by the ‘two great revolutions’ in Europe sought to understand the conditions of their emergence, and their likely consequences. Of course, no field of study can be exactly pinpointed in terms of its origins. We can quite readily trace direct continuities from writers in the middle of the eighteenth century through to later periods of social thought. The climate of ideas involved in the formation of sociology in some part, in fact, helped *give rise* to the twin processes of revolution.

How should ‘sociology’ be defined? Let me begin with a banality. Sociology is concerned with the study of human societies. Now the notion of society can be formulated in only a very general way. For under the general category of ‘societies’ we want to include not only the industrialized countries, but large agrarian imperial states (such as the Roman Empire, or traditional China), and, at the other end of the scale, small tribal communities that may comprise only a tiny number of individuals.

A society is a cluster, or system, of *institutionalized* modes of conduct. To speak of ‘institutionalized’ forms of social conduct is to refer to modes of belief and behaviour that occur and recur – or, as the terminology of modern social theory would have it, are socially *reproduced* – across long spans of time and space. Language is an excellent example of such a form of institutionalized activity, or institution, since it is so fundamental to social life. All of us speak languages which none of us, as individuals, created, although we all use language creatively. But many other aspects of social life may be institutionalized: that is, become commonly adopted practices which persist in recognizably similar form across the generations. Hence we can speak of economic institutions, political institutions and so on. Such a use of the concept ‘institution’, it should be pointed out, differs from the way in which the term is often employed in ordinary

language, as a loose synonym for ‘group’ or ‘collectivity’ – as when, say, a prison or hospital is referred to as an ‘institution’.

These considerations help to indicate how ‘society’ should be understood, but we cannot leave matters there. As an object of study, ‘society’ is shared by sociology and the other social sciences. The distinctive feature of sociology lies in its overriding concern with those forms of society that have emerged in the wake of the ‘two great revolutions’. Such forms of society include those that are industrially advanced – the economically developed countries of the West, Japan and Eastern Europe – but also in the twentieth century a range of other societies stretched across the world. [. . .]

In the light of these remarks, a definition can be offered of the subject as follows. *Sociology is a social science, having as its main focus the study of the social institutions brought into being by the industrial transformations of the past two or three centuries.* It is important to stress that there are no precisely defined divisions between sociology and other fields of intellectual endeavour in the social sciences. Neither is it desirable that there should be. Some questions of social theory, to do with how human behaviour and institutions should be conceptualized, are the shared concern of the social sciences as a whole. The different ‘areas’ of human behaviour that are covered by the various social sciences form an intellectual division of labour which can be justified in only a very general way. Anthropology, for example, is concerned [. . .] with the ‘simpler’ societies: tribal societies, chiefdoms and agrarian states. But either these have been dissolved altogether by the profound social changes that have swept through the world, or they are in the process of becoming incorporated within modern industrial states. The subject-matter of economics, to take another instance, is the production and distribution of material goods. However, economic institutions are plainly always connected with other institutions in social systems, which both influence and are influenced by them. Finally, history, as the study of the continual distancing of past

and present, is the source material of the whole of the social sciences.

[. . .] Although this type of standpoint has been very pervasive in sociology, it is one I reject. To speak of sociology, and of other subjects like anthropology or economics, as ‘social sciences’ is to stress that they involve the systematic study of an empirical subject-matter. The terminology is not confusing so long as we see that sociology and other social sciences differ from the natural sciences in two essential respects.

1 We *cannot* approach society, or ‘social facts’, as we do objects or events in the natural world,

because societies only exist in so far as they are created and re-created in our own actions as human beings. In social theory, we cannot treat human activities as though they were determined by causes in the same way as natural events are. We have to grasp what I would call the *double involvement* of individuals and institutions: we create society at the same time as we are created by it. [. . .]

2 It follows from this that the practical implications of sociology are not directly parallel to the technological uses of science, and cannot be.