Definition: sociology from Philip’s Encyclopedia

Scientific study of society, its institutions and processes. It examines areas such as social change and mobility, and underlying cultural and economic factors. Auguste Comte invented the term ‘sociology’ in 1843, and since the 19th century numerous complex and sophisticated theories have been expounded by Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and others.

Summary Article: sociology
From Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Sociology is so varied a discipline that it can be identified only very loosely as the study of social relationships, institutions and structures. Not only is this definition loose, it is also negative, for ‘social’ often means, in effect, not distinctly economic, not distinctly political, not distinctly religious and so forth. Although sociologists can trace their intellectual origins back to the Scottish Enlightenment and beyond, the discipline did not begin to become established until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although sociology is concerned with the study of social relationships, institutions and structures, the discipline is a child of industrial capitalism and its predominant field of study is modern Western societies.

There are differences in style among the sociologies of various countries. However, the predominant sociology worldwide is that of the United States, despite the fact that the word ‘sociology’ was invented by a French philosopher, Auguste Comte, early in the nineteenth century (Coser 1971). This does not reflect just the country’s general power and influence, but also the fact that it was in the USA that the discipline first established a strong institutional base, though sociology appeared fairly early in France as well. For instance, the two leading American sociology journals, the American Journal of Sociology and the American Sociological Review, were founded in 1895 and 1936. Contrast this with the two leading British sociology journals, the British Journal of Sociology and Sociology, which were founded only in 1950 and 1967. (Durkheim founded L’Année Sociologique in 1898.)

**Sociology’s focus**

Even though sociology is a varied discipline, there are some general intellectual attributes that distinguish it from anthropology. I have already noted one, its concern with the nature of modern societies. Also striking are its social meliorism and its tendency to scientific generalization. Briefly put, sociology much more than anthropology seeks to identify modernity and the problems associated with it by producing valid empirical generalizations about its subject matter.

From the establishment of their discipline late in the nineteenth century, sociologists have attempted to map the nature of modernity in general. Such a grand project led sociologists to subordinate their descriptions of specific times and places to the larger and more abstract question that concerned them. In consequence, sociology did not develop a valued body of specific case studies that parallel anthropology’s ethnography. Instead, it has concentrated on what Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 2) calls ‘comparative sociology’, an area that is much less important in anthropology.

Meliorism, too, has been important from the earliest sociological works; the discipline has been concerned not just to study modern society but also to alleviate the problems associated with...
modernity. If Comte is the first sociologist by virtue of his invention of the word, it is pertinent that one issue that concerned him was the decay of social cohesion associated with modernity. Further, of the three leading nineteenth-century thinkers who are taken as the substantive founders of sociology, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, all but Weber wrote extensively about the problems of modernity and their solution. This melioristic tendency continues to the present, as sociologists describe the nature and consequences of specific social inequalities and injustices, as well as the problems that many see as systematic features of modern capitalist society.

Likewise, from the early decades of the twentieth century sociologists have been concerned to pursue their enquiries scientifically. While this manifested itself in a concern for theoretical and analytical rigour, its more striking form has been a concern for empirical and particularly quantitative analysis, though this tendency is more pronounced in the United States than elsewhere. Thus, sociology embraced ‘hard data’, quantitative series and social surveys. This is reflected in postgraduate education. Many sociology departments urge or require their students to study statistics and quantitative methods. Similarly, many students organize their doctoral research in the classic framework of the formulation and empirical testing of hypotheses, and base their work solely on the secondary statistical analysis of national surveys and government statistics. This tendency has never been overwhelming, however, partly because of the influence of the more interpretative German verstehende sociology, particularly embodied in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958 [1904]); and partly because of the influence of the more qualitative political economy, particularly embodied in the work of Karl Marx (though this influence was much weaker in the United States than elsewhere). In spite of these qualifications, sociologists are much more likely than anthropologists to present their findings in numerical terms and to make their arguments in statistical terms.

This tendency to scientific generalization about modernity and its problems is rooted deeply in the discipline. In Britain, for instance, late nineteenth-century social reformers like Rowntree and Booth surveyed the populations of York and London to assess the empirical degree and distribution of poverty, much as sociologists late in the twentieth century surveyed the cities of the United States to assess the empirical degree and distribution of homelessness. More striking is Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1951 [1897]). Not only was his topic considered a social problem, but his method was the investigation of a succession of hypotheses about the causes of suicide, which he tested quantitatively using an extensive body of statistics over a number of years from several European countries. Although the quality of Durkheim’s data and his statistical techniques would not satisfy modern sociologists, his overall approach is indistinguishable from attempts a century later to investigate, for instance, the causes of differences in pay between men and women.

**Sociology and anthropology**

Sociology and anthropology share a number of common intellectual forebears, notably Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Equally, they can be said to share a common historical origin: the growing conception in the nineteenth century that modern (which is to say industrial capitalist) societies are unique. In spite of these commonalities, however, the two disciplines have developed in different ways and there has been less communication between the two sciences of society than one might have thought likely.

The most obvious reason for this lack of communication is that the disciplines addressed opposed faces of the question of modern society: while sociology was concerned with the world that the modern West had gained, anthropology was concerned with the world that it had lost – what early
scholars called communal and, ultimately, primitive society (Kuper 1988). Equally, as I have already noted, the research strategies of the two disciplines have been very different, with sociologists oriented more towards quantitative generalization and anthropologists oriented more toward qualitative description.

This concern with different faces of the question of modernity leads to a more subtle difference between the two disciplines that also hinders communication between them. Each tends to embrace a stylized distortion of the concerns of the other discipline that makes its theories and findings appear fairly irrelevant. Anthropologists, then, tend not only to be ignorant of the nature of modern societies, but also to have a stereotyped view of such societies that exaggerates the difference between them and the societies that anthropologists normally study. Some call this stereotyping Occidentalism. Equally, sociologists tend not only to be ignorant of the nature of societies outside the modern sphere, but also to have a stereotyped view of such societies that exaggerates the difference between them and the modern societies they conventionally study. Some call this stereotyping Orientalism.

This misperception of each other’s subject matter means that people tend to ignore the possibility that the information, interests and ideas found in one discipline are pertinent to the concerns of the other. What have models of bureaucratic organization and capitalism to do with studies of villages in Melanesia? What have models of kinship and exchange to do with studies of factory workers in Leeds? While the connections certainly exist, there is little pressure to discern and describe them.

The intellectual barriers between the two disciplines, however, are not absolute. For example, some anthropologists have studied under and been influenced by sociologists, as David Schneider studied under and was influenced by Talcott Parsons. Likewise, there is a tradition of community studies in sociology, exemplified by the Lynds’ classic description of Middletown (1929); a tradition that extended by the 1970s to include studies that were more narrowly focused but that used ethnographic techniques (e.g. Willis 1977). While the authors of these studies may have been concerned with the sociological question of modernity and its discontents, many of the results resemble conventional ethnography.

The barriers between the two disciplines are generally weakest when scholars in one discipline become dissatisfied with conventional approaches to problems and seek new ones. Thus, for instance, the anthropologist Scheffler (1965), confronted with seemingly intractable theoretical problems in the study of Oceanic kinship and social organization, went outside the discipline to draw on Goffman’s (1961) more sociological model of social groups. Similarly, sociologists dissatisfied with their own discipline’s limited view of culture draw on anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz. In the closing decades of the twentieth century these barriers were weakened still further, in two different ways. First, they weakened with the growth of specialist areas of study (such as gender and consumption) that attracted members of both disciplines. Second, they weakened as a growing number of anthropologists began to study Western societies; a change that occurred without a corresponding growth in the number of sociologists studying societies outside the modern sphere.

It is important, however, not to exaggerate the weakening of the barriers between the two disciplines, for the differences between them remain strong and members of each generally remain ignorant of the issues of interest in the other. A telling example of this is the work of Bourdieu. Sociologists are likely to be aware of his writings on French education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) but ignorant of more than the title of his work on the Kabyle (Bourdieu 1977), while the reverse is the case for most
anthropologists. An example of the difference in orientation is the way that each discipline deals with exchange. This has been an important topic in anthropology for several decades, as researchers have described different forms and understandings of exchange. However, the topic is much less important in sociology, where the dominant approach sees exchange as the transaction of equivalents between autonomous and self-regarding actors (Emerson 1976).

Conclusions
Since about 1960, sociology has grown rapidly and become markedly more fragmented, so that it is difficult to assess likely trends within the discipline. However, part of that fragmentation seems to involve a bifurcation into more quantitative and more qualitative approaches. This is apparent in the fact that there has been a growing interest in historical and cultural topics at the same time that the statistical techniques used in sociology have become more refined. While historical and cultural topics can be studied in a rigourously quantitative way, the growing concern with them marks a rejection by many of the established and powerful quantitative, scientific orientation within the discipline.

Further, it seems likely that the relationship between the two disciplines will become more complex as a growing number of anthropologists study modern Western societies. Probably this will bring individuals and subdisciplines in the two fields into greater contact, as I have already mentioned with regard to the studies of gender and consumption. It is premature, however, to suggest any significant interchange between the two disciplines more generally, for their orientations and methods remain markedly distinct.

See also: capitalism, class, complex societies, functionalism, methodology

Further reading

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JAMES G. CARRIER

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