

Introducing Sociology – R. Osborne (1996)

Sociology was invented as a means of thinking about (modern) *society* and human behaviour. It strives to understand how society functions, and why people accept – or not – its control. There was also the belief that understanding the causal relations between social phenomena would unlock the future.

As sociology has unravelled as a discipline since more and more areas of society or culture or the media become the site of specific study, there are really many "sociologies" which reflect the extraordinary complexity of present-day society.

Also, there are different approaches to the same problem, depending on the theoretical position one adopts. Functionalists like Durkheim interpret everything in terms of large-scale social structures. Symbolic interactionists interpret the way people understand one another. Marxist/Neo-Marxists interpret everything through the grid of class struggle and power relations. Phenomenologists tend to focus on the way people construct their meanings of reality.

Sociology threatens ordinary understanding of how things work, and that is why it irritates many people. Once you start to question the way that human beings interact, and the way they behave, then human culture appears quite strange once you stand outside commonsense and consider what people actually do. The problem of commonsense and the inability to link individual issues to wider sociological structures is linked to the problem of ideology, which tends to describe how people believe certain things about the world that may well not be true. Commonsense ideas about the world are frequently ideological, in the sense that they are belief rather than scientific description.

For instance, workers believed that the upper classes had a right to exploit them and that this was just the "way of the world". Sociology is really a critical awareness of social life.

Once you accept that social behaviour isn't innate, or natural, or just commonsense, you have to start thinking about how we might understand different societies. Wherever you start with social behaviour, you find that the way people behave is influenced by previously existing ideas and cultural patterns.

However, despite its search for general laws of society and its sense of itself as a unified and all-encompassing science, sociology rarely delivered and Henri Poincaré described it as "the science with the most methods and the fewest results". Although it was meant to be synoptic, it hardly ever produced analyses that everyone agreed with. But it can be argued that sociology is changing slower than its subjects, modern societies, and is inevitably forced to be self-reflexive.

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The origins of sociology

The subjects that sociologists debate have always been discussed by philosophers, poets, novelists and even religious leaders. Plato described how society should be organised 2,500 years ago. But we don't call him a sociologist.

The beginnings of sociology lie in the rational science and philosophy of the intellectual revolution called the Great Enlightenment, in the 18th century. Change, progress and critical thought – in opposition to religious belief and explanation – led people to the realization that society, like everything else, was man-made and therefore changeable. In criticizing the old order, a new vision of society was born, and the French Revolution gave a real stamp of approval to these radical new approaches.

Sociology is in fact the reflection of **modern** societies, which change rapidly. Only when society was transforming into a recognizable modern or industrial society was it possible to begin to reflect on how that transformation had happened. What causes these changes and how we react to them is a central theme of sociology.

We can trace the origins of sociology back to Baron Montesquieu's book The spirit of the Laws (1748), in which he considered the "nature and principle" that underlay different kinds of laws, and therefore, societies. The philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is recognized as having coined the term sociology itself. He grew up in the years following the French Revolution and was clearly influenced by the radicalism and turmoil of the time, as well as reacting against it.

In 1838, Harriet Martineau (1802-76) published a work, How to Observe Manners and Morals, which put forward a methodology for sociological research to draw comparative analyses of social structure. It was an early instance of cultural studies, an important branch of sociology.

Positivist sociology

The sociological positivism he developed can be seen as a deeply conservative reaction to revolutionary politics. He strongly believed that a scientific approach to understanding society would lead to orderly progress. It was the beginnings of the idea that rational social planning would solve all problems and lead to social utopia.

Positivism claimed to build scientific theories of society through observation and experimentation, thus demonstrating the laws of social development. It was claimed that general/universal laws could be derived from comparing the quantifiable evidence which must be directly known to the observer. But this was a huge claim; can human motivation be studied like physics or chemistry?

The Organic Model

August Comte also believed that all societies could be seen as developing in an evolutionary manner from a theological stage through a metaphysical phase, to a scientific – or positive – stage. This evolutionary outlook assumes that societies, like organisms, develop from the simple to the complex. It led him to assert that society should be seen as a system of interrelated parts.

Evolutionary sociology

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) advocated evolutionary theory to explain social development. His approach, known as Social Darwinism, implied that certain societies, usually Western ones, were superior and natural. The logic of this argument was that through natural selection, as in the world of animal species, societies evolved to higher levels. If you believed this, you might also think that there was no point in trying to influence the course of social evolution. *The Study of Sociology* (1873) was very popular at the time, especially with the ruling classes, who could use it as an argument against reform. He is pretty well discredited today, although Social Darwinism lives on in popular writing. Spencer claimed that injustice and poverty were natural, and that social welfare was a waste of time. His ideas kept coming back, like in Thatcherism and Reaganism. This can be viewed as a proof of how pseudo-science can be a powerful ideology – Victorian social Imperialism.

The idea that society is natural or like an organism is terribly strong, both in 'commonsense' views of the world and in the sociological theories that today we call socio-biology. Spencer, like Comte, was impressed with the natural sciences. Biological metaphors about society seemed to go hand in hand with scientific procedures. But what starts out as a respect for science ends in the theoretical and political disasters of eugenics, racism, and ultimately, the Holocaust. Socio-biology is the re-emergence of crude ideas about 'survival of the fittest' and of genetically superior races.

Social facts and solidarity

Emile Durkheim (1859-1917) was a follower of Comte in seeking scientific certainty, and attempted to establish scientific laws in a thorough way. He too was concerned with consensus and seeing society as a system.

But he went further, to argue that social systems are moral entities, and believed in a 'collective consciousness' as a moral force binding the individual to society. He was very keen to demonstrate the existence of 'social facts', which he described as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him". In other words, certain structures in society are so powerful that they control the actions of individuals – and can be studied objectively, as in natural sciences. This was positivism at its most extreme.

Durkheim believed that solidarity operates in various societies like a "social glue": the values, customs and beliefs that everyone in a society shares in a collective binding. In primitive societies, there is a form of

"mechanical solidarity" at work: society functions as a relatively close-knit affair. As society becomes more complex, through the division of labour, mechanical solidarity breaks down and is replaced by organic solidarity. In more complex industrial societies, social cohesion was clearly going to be a bigger problem. Economic interdependence in modern societies produces social cohesion but is also open to debate. .

Structural versus social action

Durkheim was always concerned with social control and the collective function of any social activity (ex: performing *duties* as a brother, husband, citizen, carrying out *commitments*, fulfilling *obligations* which are defined in law and custom and which are external to the individual). He represents **structural sociology**, as opposed to the "social action" pole which argues it is only from individual action and motivation that society is formed.

This debate can also be represented as the **consensus** versus **conflict** debate, in which society is either seen as an integrated whole composed of structures which fit together in a comprehensible way, or as conflicting interests. Sociology has two parts: social statics that relate to order and stability – that is, consensus, or the total integration of the system as a whole – and social dynamics that relate to change and institutional development – that is, conflict.

Marxian sociology

The conflict approach to sociology was developed in the 19th century by Karl Marx (1818-83). He wrote a great deal about economics, capitalism, culture, technology, class struggle and ideology. He also greatly extended that part of sociology which was concerned with grand theory, the evolution of humanity, and the possibility of reconstructing society in an entirely different mode.

He was primarily interested in social development and social change – not in how social consensus functioned but in how one group in society maintained its dominance over another. In some ways, he had a functionalist approach in that he saw certain institutions in society as functioning to maintain cohesion – but a cohesion that gives control to a specific group, the ruling class. It was Marx who strongly argued that people's commonsense views of the world were coloured by the ideology or viewpoint of the dominant groups in society, and that this produced false consciousness.

"I describe ideology as false consciousness, by which I mean people believe things that are untrue and which delude them about their real social position."

Karl Marx

Marx brought into sociology the very important idea of social class, asserting that the membership of a class was determined by the **division of labour** in a society, itself depending on the ownership of the means of production. His view of class conflict sees society as made up of opposing forces which constantly struggle against one another until strikes, revolutions or wars break out. Individuals or groups are seen as battling to define society in their own interest, which means that society is not prone to be stable or integrated.

Marx' central proposition was that capitalism was a new form of social organisation based on exploitation of the workers by the owners of capital. The capitalist bourgeois class extracted surplus value from the workers, the proletarian class, and aggressively expanded and developed the technologies of production, thus creating a world-wide system. This is a very different picture of society to that painted by Comte or Durkheim.

For Marx, capitalist society inevitably produces class antagonism rather than consensus, and because of the very structure of that society, conflict and disharmony are inevitable.

Summary of Marx' sociological approach:

- 1) All societies are founded on conflict.
- 2) The basic motor of all social change is economic.
- 3) Society should be seen as a totality in which the economic is the determining factor. The ways in which humans organise their economic production determines the overall shape of society. This is known as **economic determination**. The forms of economic organisation – capitalist production for example – determined the law, politics, culture, religion and ideology of society. Marx' sociology of capitalism argued that the profit-making production led inexorably to an entire social system that was a reflection of this pursuit of profit. The values of capitalist production penetrate all spheres of society and set the agenda for the way that things are done. The economic **infrastructure** determines the **superstructure** – or culture, politics, law, ideology, etc.
- 4) Historical change and development is not random, but can be discerned in man's relationship to economic organisation. There are "iron laws" of historical and social development, and therefore a science of society, **historical materialism**.
- 5) The individual is shaped by society, but can also change society through rational action based on scientific, historical materialist premises.
- 6) Work in a capitalist society produces alienation.
- 7) By standing outside society, through critique, human beings can understand and alter their historical position.
- 8) Therefore, through scientific critique and revolutionary action, society can be rebuilt. This idea of social renewal has proved to be a powerful idea in the 20th century. Karl Marx' theories set out the most radical rhetoric of all time, and ultimately produced the most totalitarian societies of the 20th century.

A theory of totality: Karl Marx synthesised everything that economists, political theorists and philosophers had to say about society to produce a grand sociological theory of capitalist society as a totality. His arguments on ideology, knowledge, culture and power still provide much of the framework within which sociological debates go on. Important 20th century figures like Gramsci, Adorno, Althusser and Habermas carried on this Marxist framework of thinking.

Weber's sociology

Max Weber (1864-1920) was also very concerned with stratification in society, but disagreed with Marx' ideas on the origins and development of capitalism, arguing that it was a particular religious outlook,

namely Protestantism, that distinguished societies and led them to develop capitalism (Marx instead believed that religious ideas were the product of certain economic conditions). Weber affirmed that religion could be progressive and lead to social change.

He believed in the existence of classes in society, but maintained that they were due to more than just economics (although it was still important): status, parties, religion and culture (and contrary to Marx, he wouldn't say that those were in essence determined by economic relations). The point is, Marx wrote when industrial society was still getting formed, so it was difficult to predict what would happen, and how complex it would all become.

Weber attempted a complete definition of sociology (a term that Marx didn't use) and redefined its theoretical approaches. He wanted to understand (the *Verstehen* concept) the way people behaved – their ideas, values, beliefs, motivations, intentions, etc – and how their behaviour influenced the wider society, as well as in social structure. It gave birth to a sociological approach we now call the "social action" approach – the ways and means in which people interrelate within different kinds of societies.

Another important area of sociology that Weber pioneered was the study of the way in which societies become bureaucratic or controlling – the "Big Brother" syndrome. This also related to his other major concern with rationalisation, the process by which every little part of society is subjected to analysis, organisation, professionalization and bureaucracy. Just as Marx used to point out that the rationalised reorganisation of production led to alienation, so Weber was concerned at the way in which the state constantly intervened more and more in the life of its citizens – both views encompassed the issue of determinism. A large Communist party was rising in Germany in this period (1870-1918), and there was a fear of a bureaucratic state in which individualism would be squashed.

*Fritz Lang's film **Metropolis**, Charlie Chaplin's **Modern Times** and Terry Gilliam's **Brazil** all deal with this topic in different ways.*

Weber's attitude to sociology:

- 1) It cannot develop scientific laws (anti-positivism).
- 2) It cannot predict or evaluate future social development.
- 3) It can only use collective concepts like "class" if they can be discussed in terms of individual action.
- 4) It cannot prove any evolutionary development in human societies (anti-organicism).
- 5) It should construct models or "ideal types" that could be compared.
- 6) It should aim for objectivity by systematic empirical research (by being value-free).
- 7) It cannot draw on the natural sciences because society is about consciousness, not structures.

Trying to understand the different ways in which people relate within society leads inevitably to trying to classify different kinds of society.

Tönnies: social classification

Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) analysed the forms and patterns of social ties and organisations and came up with classifications of particular societies: they were either *Gemeinschaft* (community) – in which social relationships are close, personal and valued by their members, the family being the basis of social networks, with social conformity as the norm – or *Gesellschaft* (association) – in which social relationships tend to be impersonal and non-kinship based, arising from an elaborate division of labour in which the workplace is more important than the extended family. Tönnies' basic theme is the loss of community and the rise of impersonality, which became very important in the study of the city.

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Complex societies and changes in sociology

Throughout the history of sociology, theorists have tried to classify different societies into neat systems, as seen previously. In simple societies, it was possible to classify a complex society by a set of characteristics, but it was getting harder in later societies. When sociology emigrated to the USA in the 20th century, it found new problems and new methods. Compared to Europe's social classes with entrenched interests and cultures, the American society was fundamentally more fluid and socially open, which is why the 20th century social development and theory has always tended to look towards the American model, in which traditional society was replaced by a mythology of the "frontier".

Debates about the work of the founders still go on, but everybody in sociology admits that it moves and changes with the social context. In other words, sociology has always to reinvent itself.

Individualism and individual struggle were greatly emphasized in American culture and philosophy. It is a bit of mystery then that functionalism, which so assumes social order and cohesion, became the mainstream theoretical approach in America.

The Technological Revolution

The unleashing of technology, which Karl Marx had correctly identified as the dynamo of development in capitalism, reached its fruition in the US, and in doing so produced a new and radically different society. Henry Ford's production lines, and the new rationalized time-and-motion studies in the steel industries, were the harbingers of social change so radical that sociologists were forever trying to catch up.

One could also see the Protestant ethic at work in the cultural legacy of the early Puritan fathers of the East Coast. This ethic of hard work, thrift, sobriety and avoiding the sins of the flesh was, as Weber had argued, consistent with the spirit of capitalism.

Pioneers of American sociology

Lester F. Ward (1841-1913) set out to identify the basic laws of social life, drawing on Spencer's approach, but he also advocated social reform. Two other Americans of early major influence were W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1963) and Jane Addams (1860-1935), who both conducted detailed empirical work on people's living conditions, racism and discrimination.

The Chicago School

The first department of sociology in America was founded at the University of Chicago in 1892, and was famous for two things: its urban studies and its championing of **symbolic interactionism**, which describes the way in which people interact in a face-to-face situation and revolves around the question of identity and socialisation (how people learn their culture and reproduce it) – therefore bringing sociology down to the basics of how individuals interpret their environment, from its concern in the 19th century with the "grand schemes of things". The Chicago sociologists, observing a rapidly growing, multi-ethnic society partly composed of immigrants and gangs, didn't look at society as a mega-system controlling everything, but at smaller groups and how they made sense of their place in society (the Mafia being the most extreme form of this kind of group culture). The Chicago school seemed radical at the time, partly because of its image of moral relativist.

The meanings people give to their cultural and social activities are as important as economic factors and natural forces. Religion is the most extreme example of the power of ideas, for which people have died throughout history.

The "Social Self"

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) pointed out that as we develop as individuals, we learn to use the symbols of our immediate group and to give them the same meaning (both symbols and meaning changing over time), thus symbolically interacting with our environment. How the personality developed was seen as the central building block of all social theory. Mead patented a theory of the self as constructed and reconstructed through interactive behaviour. So he came to look at society in a way similar to that of Freud and psychoanalysis, but with a behavioural twist.

The symbolic interactionist approach, like psychoanalysis, is part of the attack on social system theory. The difference is that psychoanalysis believes in the power of the Unconscious to shape the individual (with childhood and the family ultimately defining most of society's functioning), whereas the interactionists see it as a more conscious process (personality isn't fixed, but fluid).

Nature versus nurture

The process of learning is a very long one involving parents, schools, the mass media, friends, college and peer groups. Who has the most influence is an important debate in sociology. The question of how a personality is formed underlies what we call the "*nature versus nurture*" debate. The *nature* supporters claim genetics and hormones play the part; the *nurture* lobby say that it comes from social engineering.

Socialisation is a key concept in sociology, and is an area of constant moral panic over popular culture and other influences which supposedly shape a delinquent or deviant generation.

Symbolic interactionism was counteracted by functionalism, which almost entirely ignored the individual and concentrated on society as a system. Functionalists believe that all social institutions have a purpose within society – like the family – and that understanding the function is what sociology is all about. American functionalists, like Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, are mainly interested in the large-scale structures of society – social classes, economic institutions, governments, armies, etc, and are not so interested in the individual. Their work is obviously influenced by Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, and can be called social structural.

Functionalism is the nearest thing that sociology ever had to complete consensus, and Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was the king. It became the dominant theoretical approach in America during the 1940's and 1950's – as everybody in the US believed in the family, home-cooking and mother's place in the kitchen –, but in the 1960's interactionism, ethnography and feminism began to undermine it.

Parsons's basic idea was that society was a self-regulating system, and that therefore changes in one part of the system would produce reactions and compensations in another part of the system resulting in his theory of equilibrium. For example, if the democratic party system fell apart, then perhaps the military would step in to restore order, and then you'd have fascism, but equilibrium – or just a different kind of social order. In his mind, all parts of the system were supposed to be interconnected and everything integrated, so that a set of pressures would work towards the maintenance of stability.

When dealing with the problem of order, Parsons referred to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who thought people would naturally probably rip each other apart unless socially controlled and restrained. Parson's major book The Social System (1951) set out at great length what he called the functional prerequisites of a society's survival: adaption (how a social system adapts to its environment), goal attainment (setting goals towards which a society's members are directed), integration (the need to maintain social cohesion) and pattern maintenance (socialisation or reproducing society so that its values are maintained).

Parsons also accepted social evolution, like Spencer and all the other 19th century evolutionists who thought we were evolving towards more complex, superior societies.

Functionalists like to make lists of supposedly universal functional prerequisites of society, which are very like the hard facts and general laws that once finds in physics and which "hard" sociologists are always eager to invent. If you believe that society and all its members must be seen as a total system, then the functionalist approach becomes essential, and understanding conformity is a functional prerequisite of being a sociologist. The 1960's went against this normative utopia because hardly anyone conformed to it.

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003) was a functionalist who in fact uncovered the basic fallacy of functionalism, the myth of coherence, by pointing out three fallacious hypotheses:

1. the postulate of indispensability

The question of how a particular social institution reflects a functional, or essential, prerequisite of social order becomes a tautology, since in order to understand the function of something in society, you already assume it does have a function, which then explains why it's there – but if it weren't there, it wouldn't have a function – but it's uncertain which one comes first, the need to create a social institution to fulfil a particular function, or the newly created social institution.

2. functional unity

Why should it be assumed that societies are integrated, coherent systems, when many societies are clearly nothing of the sort and appear to be in constant conflict? Would functionalists argue that the purpose of civil war was to produce harmony and integration? To get around this problem, a distinction was made between manifest and latent (or hidden) functions.

3. the postulate of universal functionalism

Why does everything have to have a function for the maintenance of society? Merton proposed to distinguish between functions (or eufunctions) and dysfunctions; you could point out certain areas of behaviour that could be dysfunctional in a society and yet not be a problem for the overall analysis. He argued that the functionalist approach isn't necessarily about how society actually works but is really just a method of analysis.

Functionalists (like Davis and Moore, 1945) also argued that stratification and inequality was found in all societies and was therefore necessary, fulfilling a function described as making sure that the best people were in the top jobs. This bit of tautologic nonsense greatly endeared functionalists to those who ran things, and makes one wonder whether functionalism was simply an acceptance and an apology for the status quo.

This brought the question of social mobility and meritocracy; is an elite maintained in society because its members have greater access to wealth, education, power, contacts and rewards or because they are naturally better at things?

Functionalism appeared to be unhistorical, uncritical and unable to examine the real complexities of people and society. The real question that functionalism never answered is why societies change so much and apparently so randomly.

Conflict theory

Conflict theory, in reaction to functionalism in the 1950's and 1960's, pointed out that society was made up of conflicting groups who slugged it out most of the time, rather than functioning as one big happy family. The conflict theorists argued that the real focus of all social activity was conflict over scarce resources such as land, resources, wealth, the means of production, water, housing, education, etc, and that institutions were mediating between social groups.

Karl Marx was one of the original conflict theorists, made plain in the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), as well as Georg Simmel (1858-1918).

Postmodern sociologists think this is going a bit far, but agree that conflict rather than consensus is the basis of society. Conflict has become institutionalised in modern society, and it is this process that gives some stability to the social order. Power, politics and social institutions are therefore seen as dynamic rather than functional. Society isn't a system or an organism, it's a battle, which the rich usually win.

Postmodernism and the 1960's

Since the decline of functionalism, which was clearly linked to the conservatism of the post-war boom years, sociology became increasingly fragmented into numerous different approaches: marxism, symbolic interactionism, ethnography, feminism, urban studies, neo-Marxism, structuralism, semiotics... The basic sociological problems, still there, were approachable from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, and this reflected what we call our "postmodern condition". Postmodern means pick 'n' mix and there's nothing which is fixed!

The most important points about the post 1960's development of sociology are the return of Marxism, the rise of feminism and the development of an anti-colonialist theory of historical development. Until then, sociology seemed to have forgotten that much of the industrial society and modernisation was built on the back of an Imperialism that subjugated the Third World in order to pay for such development.

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) provided a critique of both the status quo in sociology and of the self-complacent power elites in the US. His famous work, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), savaged the complacency of functionalism and its cosy relationship with power elites in an attack that set the tone for the revival of critical sociology in the 1960's.

Neo-Marxism

Marxism underwent many extreme mutations during the 20th century. It was distorted by Stalin and Mao, but came back during the 1960's, inspired by anti-bourgeois intelligentsia representatives like Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who wrote most of his theories in prison and had to disguise what he was saying, or Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80). The sociological approaches derived from New Left Marxism were not connected to the politics of Communist countries, and produced critiques of both socialism and capitalism.

Marx had originally argued that capitalist society would become ever more polarised between workers and bourgeoisie, although it did not happen in the West during the 20th century. Marxism also failed to conceptualise the individual in society. Despite its flaws, it remained essential to sociology as the two are centrally about industrial society. Marxists began to rethink how capitalist society functioned. It was increasingly recognised that society was becoming more complex and that there were more classes and intermediate groups in society.

Gramsci was a key thinker in redefining the debate about class and power; he replaced Marx' notion of inevitable class struggle in society with a more flexible view of the conflicts between groups, parties, individuals and ideologies. His concept of hegemony – or winning leadership by consent in society – has come to be central in sociological discussions of the complexity of modern society; he pointed out that the bourgeoisie did not rule by force alone but also by consent, forming political alliances with other groups and working ideologically to dominate society (he developed the concept of contested culture, meeting the minimum needs of the majority while serving the interests of the dominant class). Society could be seen as in constant tension rather than as a stable entity.

It also conveyed the idea that individuals are always reacting to and redefining the society and culture they live in. Ideologies are not simply injected into passive subjects who live them out, but are areas of debate and battle between dominant and subordinate groups in society. His ideas have had a lot of influence in cultural studies and in discussions about popular culture – which is no longer considered just "circuses for the masses".

Like Gramsci, French Marxist Louis Althusser (1918-90) argued that education played an important part in spreading bourgeois ideology or reproducing the dominant culture. He also thought that the mass media were an important means of sociological control in modern society and one of the primary definers of our culture today.

The Frankfurt School

This group of German critical theorists were seeing that cultural and economic domination seemed to be taking on new forms. They emphasised the importance of culture and ideology in shaping the individual in mass society, which was blinding everyone to the realities of life. The rise of Fascism and of what they called the "culture industries" seemed to them like similar signs of a new type of society that controlled its members through sophisticated cultural manipulation. They argued that "high culture" still retained a critical view of society, a sort of ivory tower against the debasement of the new media culture.

To counter Marxism's failure to conceptualise the individual in society, the Frankfurt School incorporated Freud's theories to develop an understanding of the subject in bourgeois society.

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), a semi-detached member of the Frankfurt School, became very famous during the 1960's for his support for radical and anti-authoritarian causes. He was once called the "grandfather of terrorism", a reference to his critique of capitalist society, One Dimensional Man (1964), which brought together the arguments of Frankfurt School that capitalism generated false needs, false consciousness and a mass culture that enslaved the working classes. Unlike the other theorists however, he argued for an authentic opposition and for liberation.

Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) was concerned with **rational communication** and the possibilities of it existing in capitalist society. Unlike the other theorists at the Frankfurt School, he was not completely pessimistic about such a possibility. In The Theory of Communicative Action (1981), he put forward a complex analysis of capitalist society and the possible means whereby the effects of instrumental reason (the rationality of Weber) can be resisted through moral and communicative emancipation. He tried to conciliate the determinist strands of the Frankfurt School and the action-based ideas of its American opponents; in considering individual emancipation, he drew on the American sociology, like symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, which emphasise the total sphere of an individual's consciousness to construct its meanings of reality.

In line with the ideas put forward by the Frankfurt School, David Cooper (1931-86) described the family as "an ideological conditioning device in an exploitative society" in The Death of the Family (1970).

The Structuralist approach

After the Neo-Marxist shift in sociology came the second wave of structuralist theory, which one again rewrote the ways in which social determinism and social agency were conceived.

The pioneering work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) began as a study of language but ended in studying almost everything as structure, including society. Saussure's theory of **semiotics** – the study of signs – filtered into sociology in the post 1960's shift into pluralistic theoretical approaches.

The most relevant part of the structuralist enterprise for sociology is in the area of cultural studies, that is the analysis of culture as a signifying problem. Starting from the axiom that language is a structured system, culture was then examined as a similar structured system, and then eventually society as a whole. Our language system, through its rules and conventions, arbitrarily endows words with connotations, and how we understand our environment is determined by that system. We acquire our culture through language and are ultimately trapped in language. So structuralists argue that the structure of language governs the signifying system of culture.

Francis Bacon, English statesman, scientist and philosopher (1561-1626), remarked: "Men imagine that their minds have the command of language; but it happens that language bears rule over their minds".

The work on structuralism of Roland Barthes (1915-80) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (2009) in particular left a strong impact on many areas of sociology.

In his analysis of signs in popular culture, Barthes unveiled the structures that enable the mass media to disseminate ideological views of the world, based on its ability to make signs, images, signifiers work in a particular way so as to convey deeper, mythical meanings. The semiotic analysis of these structures does not dwell on the individual's action and social change though; structuralists did not try to answer the question of who makes the structures and who changes them, so symbolic interactionists did not think much of them.

Feminism

The approach that most critically undermined traditional sociology's claim to universal truth was feminism. Value-free research was supposed to mean sex-blind research, but the analyses were considering males most of the time, and females were presented in a distorted manner, usually as add-ons, assuming natural functions.

Also, feminism was keen to have sociology take into account the relationship between the public and private (domestic) spheres in its analyses of society.

One of the other outcomes of the feminist critique of sociology was an increasing awareness of the importance of race, and anti-racism, which also implied a fundamental criticism of the categories of sociological theory.

Globalisation

From the certainties of functionalism of the 1950's, sociology has moved a long way to its present unsettled climate. Its task has been redefined both by the undermining of traditional theoretical approaches and by the sudden and rapid transformation of nation-states into postmodern global economies. Actually one of the fundamental problems that affected sociology was that it had always assumed the nation-state as its sphere of analysis, with its own society – due to its initial focus on nationalism and empires. Globalisation broke down the nation-state, removed the barriers between cultures, and forced sociology to conceptualise a social system that went global.

Key features of globalisation:

- interconnectedness of all societies
- transnational corporations that work in a global economy
- international economic integration, global production
- transnational media systems, the "global village", media imperialism
- global consumerism and culture (macdonaldization)
- mobility of capital and resources

Welfare and poverty

The problem of the underclass, a new group of people who, through lack of employment, skills, wealth or poverty, appear to be virtually outside ordinary society – the unskilled in the advanced capitalist countries are replaced by cheap labour in the developing world, or by technology –, raises the big issue of wealth, poverty and the 20th century phenomenon of welfare state, which is central in today's sociological debates. It becomes a debate on how society should work: should it be rampantly capitalist or should the community come first?

Sir William Beveridge (1879-1963), director of the London School of Economics, invented the welfare state after the Second World War, with the aim of providing for those who, through no fault of their own, were unemployed, ill, old, or simply poor. This social democratic idea was meant to cement the relationship between citizenship and welfare, and to enshrine the right of individuals to health, employment, education and housing; the modern idea of the nation-state is therefore one of a community of citizens who all have common rights and freedoms.

Social democratic arguments are that market forces are destructive and uncontrolled, that capitalism leads to monopoly, inequality, lack of welfare, poverty, greed, lack of consensus, disharmony.

But these ideas of rights and freedom constantly come up against the realities of economic power, ownership and educational and political power. From its very inception, Conservatives have attacked the idea of the welfare state as being an infringement on the free play of market forces, which they claim really should

really dictate how societies function. Liberals/free-marketeers, argue that individuals should look after themselves without the state intervening, that capitalism should not be hampered by the state, that government breeds bureaucracy which stifles the production of wealth. Besides, free-marketeers regularly attack the whole idea of sociology, claiming that society is not an observable entity; either it's an illusion or it's simply the market forces that connect people.

Charles Murray, an American liberal, came up with a theory of the underclass which argued that people on welfare benefits became dependent on them and didn't want to work, thus creating an underclass. All that had to be done was removing those benefits, so that people would become responsible and get jobs.

These political battles within sociology and social policy demonstrate how closely social theory is linked to historical change and development, and how much the political climate influences how sociology operates.

Michel Foucault (1926-84)

Foucault put great emphasis on the long-standing criticism of sociology as being limited by the social and ideological ideas of its time. He pointed out that sociology, like all other disciplines, was actually a set of ideas, an explanation of things, that was involved in the historical processes that it claimed to explain, and part of a power structure that reproduced those structures. It was not value-free, but bound to the form of power in society, an apparatus – the educational and professional structures of sociology – and to the control of certain discourses about society. Foucault's radicalism is part of what we call the postmodern turn in sociology: the refusal of all meta-narratives, or grand theories about society and history. He was anti-essentialist and anti-historical.

Foucault's concerns have also centred on how knowledge is produced and utilised in a society, and how power and discourse are linked to knowledge.

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007)

Baudrillard's view was that society didn't exist, or if it did, was entirely composed of signs. He argued that televisual communication and its signs had so come to dominate global reality that people had a great deal of difficulty deciding what was real, and were accepting simulations. Society had become "hyperreal".

His stance was that we lived in a composite post-infotainment giant-screen meta-world, for which sociology was about as useful as Egyptian trigonometry would be to an astronaut.

He suggested however that in some ways people had greater freedom in this postmodern world to pick whatever images and lifestyles they liked.

A lot of sociology implies an idea of a stable, coherent society, but the speed of social change makes that seem like an illusion. Present-day society is bewildering in its speed of transformation, new technology, globalisation, incredible wealth and poverty, mass unemployment, linked by a global media and postmodern wars and insurrections.

So is sociology dead?

As a set of theories that explain everything in a particular society, probably yes.

As critical understanding of how human societies function, or how being human is constantly being redefined, no.