

## The History of Sociology

Sociology has a short but illustrious history. Of course, centuries ago people such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates thought and argued about social behaviour. But most of their discussion was in the form of rhetorical speech and debate. They posed questions and answered them based on their personal reasoning and with little reference to the world around them. They did not, in other words, make systematic observations to test their speculations against lived reality. They were essentially social philosophers, concerned with how things ought to be, not how things were and why they happened to be so. The field of sociology emerged in the nineteenth century when European social philosophers began to employ scientific methods of observation for the first time - they started to base their observations on statistics, on historical research and on their own observations of the phenomena they wished to explain.

Three social transformations in particular lead the way for the birth of sociology:

- 1) The French Revolution
- 2) The Industrial Revolution
- 3) The rise of the Natural Sciences

In the late 18th century, the concept of the citizen was extended beyond the elite, and in the aftermath of the French Revolution many people began to question the legitimacy of those in authority over them. Furthermore, the events of the French Revolution introduced a new principle into history by demanding that political action be taken to redress mass poverty and deprivation.

The Industrial Revolution brought about massive population growth, urbanization, and transformation in ways of living. Societies that had long been rural and stable became industrialized, urbanized, and chaotic. Peasants were freed from the control of overlords and the church but were forced to live in congested conditions where poverty and squalor were commonplace. They were absorbed into factories where work was difficult, monotonous and exploitative. Marx and Engels observed the transformation in the lives of the industrial working classes and developed a theory of capitalist development which still resonates today. Indeed, Marx would not have been the least surprised at the crisis-ridden state of contemporary capitalism. It's all there in his theories developed over 150 years ago!

Natural sciences at the same time were highly respected because they were providing ways to explain and to control aspects of the physical world. Some social philosophers looked on natural science as a model for how they might go about understanding the social world. They sought a systematic explanation or "laws of the social order" to seek to define and proscribe human behaviour. For example, Herbert Spencer compared human society to the living organism. Each part of society contributes to the whole and none can function effectively in the absence of the others. Each part of society – family, education, religion, government, industry- performs its own function and in so doing contribute to the wellbeing of society as a whole. Spencer concluded that society is self-regulating (just like nature) and that adjustments to change would be made through natural selection. No interventions need to be made on the part of those who are socially excluded. A modern variant of this

theory is neo-liberalism, which has been tested and challenged by the unravelling of international financial capitalism in the recent past.

## **The Promise of Sociology**

The sociological imagination is the capacity to make the connection between the patterns of our own lives and the course of history. In our everyday lives we don't always make the connection between the individual and society, between the self and the wider world. But changes which occur in our individual lives are shaped by changes in the wider world. This is what sociology teaches us. When technology is revolutionized people often lose their jobs; when nations go to war, children are orphaned; when the banks fail, people lose their life savings. The point as C.Wright Mills so eloquently stated is that neither the life of the individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both. This insight lies at the core of the sociological imagination and was acutely observable in the words of [President Obama in his Inauguration speech](#).

The aim of sociology is to illustrate the crucial linkages between the life experience of any given individual, and his or her social circumstances. Social circumstances change over time so we can think of them as history in-the-making. Social circumstances-- such as where you live, what work you do, and the groups to which you belong—all shape life experiences. In turn, how we experience our social world may lead us, over time, to seek changes in how that social world is organised. This is the promise of sociology.

Sociology makes most sense when it moves out of academia and into the real world. Sociology offers a range of insights into the human condition and is an important means towards self and collective empowerment. We can use sociology to develop a richer engagement with the wider world.

Read more about the [History of Irish sociology](#)