

Chapter 4: Society and Social Interaction

OpenStax College

This work is produced by The Connexions Project and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License



Figure 1: Sociologists study how societies interact with the environment and how they use technology. This Maasai village in Tanzania looks very different from a rural American town. (Photo courtesy of Guillaume Baviere/Wikimedia Commons)

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m42986/latest/?collection=col11407/1.7>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/soc101/>

Attributed to: Rice University and OpenStax College



Saylor.org
Page 1 of 22

4.1 Introduction to Society and Social Interaction

Early in the morning, a group of male warriors creeps out of the village and heads for the savannah. They must be careful not to wake the other members of the tribe, lest they be accosted by the women or elders. Once they have regrouped on the plains, the warriors begin preparing for the hunt. The eldest members of the group choose the most qualified hunters, known as *ilmeluaya*, meaning men who are not afraid of death. Warriors who are not selected are sent home in shame.

Once the select group has been chosen, the warriors begin the hunt. They scour the plains for footprints or droppings, and search for dense bushes or tall termite mounds that might conceal their resting prey. The search can take ten minutes to ten hours, but once a lion is found, the warriors quickly move into place.

Selected hunters ring bells and rattle the brush, forcing the lion away from its protected hiding spot. The goal is to face the beast one-on-one on the open savannah. There will be no tricks or cheating, simply warrior against warrior. If all goes as planned, the lion will be brought down with a single spear.

When the warriors return to the village with their trophy, it is the beginning of a weeklong celebration. Although the hunt must be planned in secret, news of the warriors' success spreads quickly, and all village members come to congratulate the victors. The warrior who wounded the lion first is honored and given a nickname based on his accomplishment. Songs are sung about the warrior, and from now on he will be remembered and acknowledged throughout the community, even among other tribes.

To the Maasai, lion hunting is about more than food and security. It is a way to strengthen the bonds of community and the hierarchy among the hunters. Disputes over power are settled before the hunt, and roles are reinforced at the end, with the bravest warrior receiving the lion's tail as a trophy (Maasai Association 2011). Although Maasai society is very different from contemporary America, both share the human need to cooperate and live together in order to survive.

References

Maasai Association. "Facing the Lion." Retrieved January 4, 2012 (<http://www.maasai-association.org/lion.html>).

4.2 Types of Societies

Summary:

- Describe the difference between pre-industrial, industrial, and postindustrial societies
- Understand the role of environment on preindustrial societies
- Understand how technology impacts societal development



Figure 2: Maasai men are hunting with shepherd's staves and spears. How does technology influence a society's daily occupations? (Photo courtesy of Abir Anwar/flickr)

Maasai villagers, Tehranians, Americans – each is a society. But what does this mean? Exactly what is a society? In sociological terms, **society** refers to a group of people who live in a definable community and share the same culture. On a broader scale, society consists of the people and institutions around us, our shared beliefs, and our cultural ideas. Typically, more advanced societies also share a political authority.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1924–) defined societies in terms of their technological sophistication. As a society advances, so does its use of technology. Societies with rudimentary technology depend on the fluctuations of their environment, while industrialized societies have more control over the impact of their surroundings and thus develop different cultural features. This distinction is so important that sociologists generally classify societies along a spectrum of their level of industrialization, from preindustrial to industrial to postindustrial.

Preindustrial Societies

Before the Industrial Revolution and the widespread use of machines, societies were small, rural, and dependent largely on local resources. Economic production was limited to the amount of labor a human being could provide, and there were few specialized occupations. The very first occupation was that of hunter-gatherer.

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m42986/latest/?collection=col11407/1.7>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/soc101/>

Attributed to: Rice University and OpenStax College



Saylor.org
Page 3 of 22

Hunter-Gatherer

Hunter-gatherer societies demonstrate the strongest dependence on the environment of the various types of preindustrial societies. As the basic structure of human society until about 10,000–12,000 years ago, these groups were based around kinship or tribes. Hunter-gatherers relied on their surroundings for survival – they hunted wild animals and foraged for uncultivated plants for food. When resources became scarce, the group moved to a new area to find sustenance, meaning they were nomadic. These societies were common until several hundred years ago, but today only a few hundred remain in existence, such as indigenous Australian tribes sometimes referred to as “aborigines,” or the Bambuti, a group of pygmy hunter-gatherers residing in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hunter-gatherer groups are quickly disappearing as the world’s population explodes.

Pastoral

Changing conditions and adaptations led some societies to rely on the domestication of animals where circumstances permitted. Roughly 7,500 years ago, human societies began to recognize their ability to tame and breed animals and to grow and cultivate their own plants. **Pastoral societies** rely on the domestication of animals as a resource for survival. Unlike earlier hunter-gatherers who depended entirely on existing resources to stay alive, pastoral groups were able to breed livestock for food, clothing, and transportation, creating a surplus of goods. Herding, or pastoral, societies remained nomadic because they were forced to follow their animals to fresh feeding grounds. Around the time that pastoral societies emerged, specialized occupations began to develop, and societies commenced trading with local groups.

The Bedouin:

Throughout Northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula live the Bedouin, modern-day nomads. While many different tribes of Bedouin exist, they all share similarities. Members migrate from one area to another, usually in conjunction with the seasons, settling near oases in the hot summer months. They tend to herds of goats, camels, and sheep, and they harvest dates in the fall (Kjeilen).

In recent years, there has been increased conflict between the Bedouin society and more modernized societies. National borders are harder to cross now than in the past, making the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouin difficult. The clash of traditions among Bedouin and other residents has led to discrimination and abuse. Bedouin communities frequently have high poverty and unemployment rates, and their members have little formal education (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005).

The future of the Bedouin is uncertain. Government restrictions on farming and

residence are slowly forcing them to integrate into modern society. Although their ancestors have traversed the deserts for thousands of years, the days of the nomadic Bedouin may be at an end.



Figure 3: This photo shows a Bedouin family from eastern Oman. How will their society respond to the constraints modern society places on a nomadic lifestyle? (Photo courtesy of Tanenhaus/Wikimedia Commons)

Horticultural

Around the same time that pastoral societies were on the rise, another type of society developed, based on the newly developed capacity for people to grow and cultivate plants. Previously, the depletion of a region's crops or water supply forced pastoral societies to relocate in search of food sources for their livestock. **Horticultural societies** formed in areas where rainfall and other conditions allowed them to grow stable crops. They were similar to hunter-gatherers in that they largely depended on the environment for survival, but since they didn't have to abandon their location to follow resources, they were able to start permanent settlements. This created more stability and more material goods and became the basis for the first revolution in human survival.

Agricultural

While pastoral and horticultural societies used small, temporary tools such as digging sticks or hoes, **agricultural societies** relied on permanent tools for survival. Around 3000 B.C.E., an explosion of new technology known as the Agricultural Revolution made farming possible – and profitable. Farmers learned to rotate the types of crops grown on their fields and to reuse waste products such as fertilizer, leading to better harvests and bigger surpluses of food. New tools for digging and harvesting were made of metal, making them more effective and longer lasting. Human settlements grew into towns and cities, and particularly bountiful regions became centers of trade and commerce.

This is also the age in which people had the time and comfort to engage in more contemplative and thoughtful activities, such as music, poetry, and philosophy. This period became referred to as the “dawn of civilization” by some because of the development of leisure and humanities. Craftspeople were able to support themselves through the production of creative, decorative, or thought-provoking aesthetic objects and writings.

As resources became more plentiful, social classes became more divisive. Those who had more resources could afford better living and developed into a class of nobility. Difference in social standing between men and women increased. As cities expanded, ownership and preservation of resources became a pressing concern.

Feudal

The ninth century gave rise to **feudal societies**. These societies contained a strict hierarchical system of power based around land ownership and protection. The nobility, known as lords, placed vassals in charge of pieces of land. In return for the resources that the land provided, vassals promised to fight for their lords.

These individual pieces of land, known as fiefdoms, were cultivated by the lower class. In return for maintaining the land, peasants were guaranteed a place to live and protection from outside enemies. Power was handed down through family lines, with peasant families serving lords for generations and generations. Ultimately, the social and economic system of feudalism would fail, replaced by capitalism and the technological advances of the industrial era.

Industrial Society

In the 18th century, Europe experienced a dramatic rise in technological invention, ushering in an era known as the Industrial Revolution. What made this period remarkable was the number of new inventions that influenced people’s daily lives. Within a generation, tasks that had until this point required months of labor became achievable in a matter of days. Before the Industrial Revolution, work was largely person- or animal-based, relying on human workers or horses to power mills and drive pumps. In 1782, James Watt and Matthew Boulton created a steam engine that could do the work of 12 horses by itself.

Steam power began appearing everywhere. Instead of paying artisans to painstakingly spin wool and weave it into cloth, people turned to textile mills that produced fabric quickly at a better price, and often with better quality. Rather than planting and harvesting fields by hand, farmers were able to purchase mechanical seeders and threshing machines that caused agricultural productivity to soar. Products such as paper and glass became available to the average person, and the quality and accessibility of education and health care soared. Gas lights allowed increased visibility in the dark, and towns and cities developed a nightlife.

One of the results of increased productivity and technology was the rise of urban centers. Workers flocked to factories for jobs, and the populations of cities became increasingly diverse. The new generation became less preoccupied with maintaining family land and traditions, and more focused on acquiring wealth and achieving upward mobility for themselves and their family. People wanted their children and their children's children to continue to rise to the top, and as capitalism increased, so did social mobility.

It was during the 18th and 19th centuries of the Industrial Revolution that sociology was born. Life was changing quickly and the long-established traditions of the agricultural eras did not apply to life in the larger cities. Masses of people were moving to new environments and often found themselves faced with horrendous conditions of filth, overcrowding, and poverty. Social scientists emerged to study the relationship between the individual members of society and society as a whole.

It was during this time that power moved from the hands of the aristocracy and “old money” to business-savvy newcomers who amassed fortunes in their lifetimes. Families such as the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts became the new power players, using their influence in business to control aspects of government as well. Eventually, concerns over the exploitation of workers led to the formation of labor unions and laws that set mandatory conditions for employees. Although the introduction of new technology at the end of the 19th century ended the industrial age, much of our social structure and social ideas – like family, childhood, and time standardization – have a basis in industrial society.

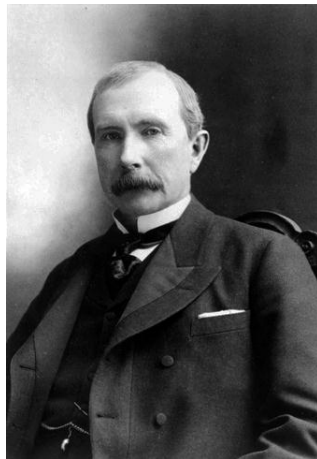


Figure 4: John D. Rockefeller, cofounder of the Standard Oil Company, came from an unremarkable family of salesmen and menial laborers. By his death at age 98, he was worth \$1.4 billion. In industrial societies, business owners such as Rockefeller hold the majority of the power. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Postindustrial Society

Information societies, sometimes known as postindustrial or digital societies, are a recent development. Unlike industrial societies that are rooted in the production of material goods, information societies are based on the production of information and services. Digital technology is the steam engine of information societies, and computer moguls such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are its John D. Rockefellers and Cornelius Vanderbilts. Since the economy of information societies is driven by knowledge and not material goods, power lies with those in charge of storing and distributing information. Members of a postindustrial society are likely to be employed as sellers of services – software programmers or business consultants, for example – instead of producers of goods. Social classes are divided by access to education, since without technical skills, people in an information society lack the means for success.

Summary

Societies are classified according to their development and use of technology. For most of human history, people lived in preindustrial societies characterized by limited technology and low production of goods. After the Industrial Revolution, many societies based their economies around mechanized labor, leading to greater profits and a trend toward greater social mobility. At the turn of the new millennium, a new type of society emerged. This postindustrial, or information, society is built on digital technology and non-material goods.

Further Research

The Maasai are a modern pastoral society with an economy largely structured around herds of cattle. Read more about the Maasai people and see pictures of their daily lives here: <http://www.maasai.com/maasai/>

References

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. 2005. "Israel: Treatment of Bedouin, Including Incidents of Harassment, Discrimination or Attacks; State Protection (January 2003–July 2005)", Refworld, July 29. Retrieved February 10, 2012 (<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/440ed71325.html>).

Kjeilen, Tore. "Bedouin." Looklex.com. Retrieved February 17, 2012 (<http://looklex.com/index.htm>).

Glossary

agricultural societies: societies that rely on farming as a way of life

feudal societies: societies that operate on a strict hierarchical system of power based around land ownership and protection

horticultural societies: societies based around the cultivation of plants

hunter-gatherer societies: societies that depend on hunting wild animals and gathering uncultivated plants for survival

industrial societies: societies characterized by a reliance on mechanized labor to create material goods

information societies: societies based on the production of nonmaterial goods and services

pastoral societies: societies based around the domestication of animals

4.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Society

Summary:

- Describe Durkheim's functionalist view of society
- Understand the conflict theorist view of society
- Explain Marx's concepts of class and alienation
- Identify how symbolic interactionists understand society



Figure 5: Warren Buffett's ideas about taxation and spending habits of the very wealthy are controversial, particularly since they raise questions about America's embedded system of class structure and social power. The three major sociological paradigms differ in their perspectives on these issues. (Photo courtesy of Medill DC/flickr)

While many sociologists have contributed to research on society and social interaction, three thinkers form the base of modern-day perspectives. Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber developed different theoretical approaches to help us understand the way societies function.

Émile Durkheim and Functionalism

As a functionalist, Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) perspective on society stressed the necessary interconnectivity of all of its elements. To Durkheim, society was greater than the sum of its parts. He asserted that individual behavior was not the same as collective behavior, and that studying collective behavior was quite different from studying an individual's actions. Durkheim called the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society the **collective conscience**. In his quest to understand what causes individuals to act in similar and predictable ways, he wrote, "If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as punishment" (Durkheim 1895). Durkheim also believed that **social integration**, or the strength of ties that people have to their social groups, was a key factor in social life.

Following the ideas of Comte and Spencer, Durkheim likened society to that of a living organism, in which each organ plays a necessary role in keeping the being alive. Even the socially deviant members of society are necessary, Durkheim argued, as punishments for deviance affirm established cultural values and norms. That is, punishment of a crime reaffirms our moral consciousness. "A crime is a crime because we condemn it," Durkheim wrote in 1893. "An act offends the common consciousness not because it is criminal, but it is criminal because it offends that consciousness" (Durkheim 1893). Durkheim called these elements of society "social facts." By this, he meant that social forces were to be considered real and existed outside the individual.

As an observer of his social world, Durkheim was not entirely satisfied with the direction of society in his day. His primary concern was that the cultural glue that held society together was failing, and that people were becoming more divided. In his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim argued that as society grew more complex, social order made the transition from mechanical to organic.

Pre-industrial societies, Durkheim explained, were held together by **mechanical solidarity**, a type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture. Societies with mechanical solidarity act in a mechanical fashion; things are done mostly because they have always been done that way. This type of thinking was common in preindustrial societies where strong bonds of kinship and a low division of labor created shared morals and values among people, such as hunter-gatherer groups. When people tend to do the same type of work, Durkheim argued, they tend to think and act alike.

In industrial societies, mechanical solidarity is replaced with **organic solidarity**, social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences. In capitalist societies, Durkheim wrote, division of labor becomes so specialized that everyone is doing different things. Instead of punishing members of a society for failure to assimilate

to common values, organic solidarity allows people with differing values to coexist. Laws exist as formalized morals and are based on restitution rather than revenge.

While the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is, in the long run, advantageous for a society, Durkheim noted that it can be a time of chaos and “normlessness.” One of the outcomes of the transition is something he called social **anomie**. Anomie – literally, “without law” – is a situation in which society no longer has the support of a firm collective consciousness. Collective norms are weakened. People, while more interdependent to accomplish complex tasks, are also alienated from each other. Anomie is experienced in times of social uncertainty, such as war, or a great upturn or downturn in the economy. As societies reach an advanced stage of organic solidarity, they avoid anomie by redeveloping a set of shared norms. According to Durkheim, once a society achieves organic solidarity, it has finished its development.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is certainly among the most significant social thinkers in recent history. While there are many critics of his work, it is still widely respected and influential. For Marx, society’s constructions were predicated upon the idea of “base and superstructure.” This term refers to the idea that a society’s economic character forms its base, upon which rests the culture and social institutions, the superstructure. For Marx, it is the base (economy) that determines what a society will be like.

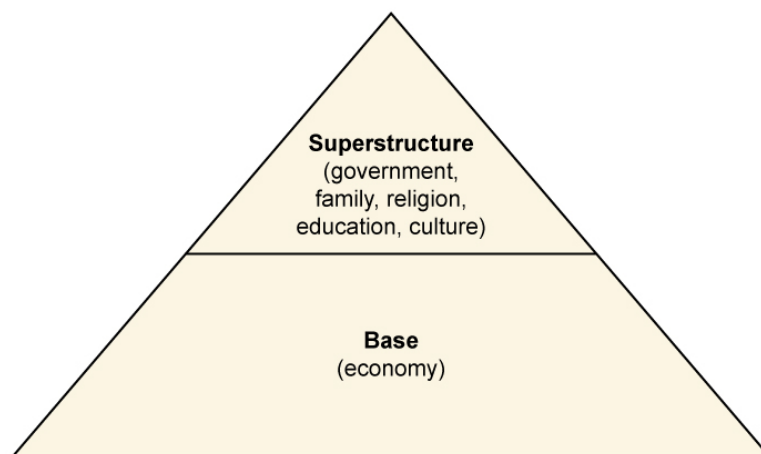


Figure 6: Karl Marx asserted that all elements of a society’s structure depend on its economic structure.

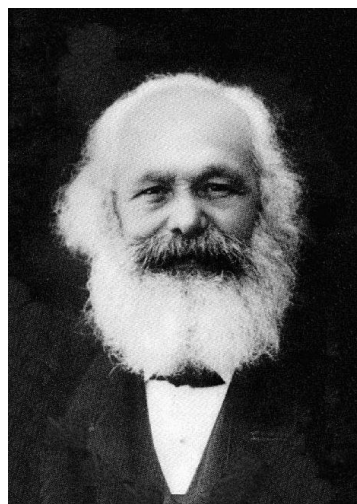
Additionally, Marx saw conflict in society as the primary means of change. Economically, he saw conflict existing between the owners of the means of production – the **bourgeoisie** – and the laborers, called the **proletariat**. Marx maintained that these conflicts appeared consistently throughout history during times of social revolution. These revolutions or “class antagonisms” as he called them, were a result of one class dominating another. Most recently, with the end of feudalism, a new revolutionary class he called the bourgeoisie dominated the proletariat laborers.

The bourgeoisie were revolutionary in the sense that they represented a radical change in the structure of society. In Marx's words, "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels 1848).

In the mid-19th century, as industrialization was booming, labor became more and more exploitative of the working class. The large manufacturers of steel were particularly ruthless, and their facilities became popularly dubbed "satanic mills" based on a poem by William Blake. Marx's colleague and friend, Frederick Engels, wrote *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* in 1844, which described in detail the horrid conditions.

Such is the Old Town of Manchester, and on re-reading my description, I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. And such a district exists in the heart of the second city of England, the first manufacturing city of the world.

Add to that the long hours, the use of child labor, and exposure to extreme conditions of heat, cold, and toxic chemicals, and it is no wonder that Marx and Engels referred to capitalism as the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."



(a)



(b)

Figure 7: Karl Marx (left) and Friedrich Engels (right) analyzed differences in social power between "have" and "have-not" groups. (Photo (a) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; Photo (b) courtesy of George Lester/Wikimedia Commons)

For Marx, what we do defines who we are. In historical terms, in spite of the persistent nature of one class dominating another, some element of humanity existed. There was at least some connection between the worker and the product, augmented by the natural conditions of seasons and the rise and fall of the sun, such as we see in an agricultural society. But with the bourgeoisie revolution and the rise of industry and

capitalism, the worker now worked for wages alone. His relationship to his efforts was no longer of a human nature, but based on artificial conditions.

Marx described modern society in terms of alienation. **Alienation** refers to the condition in which the individual is isolated and divorced from his or her society, work, or the sense of self. Marx defined four specific types of alienation.

Alienation from the product of one's labor. An industrial worker does not have the opportunity to relate to the product he is laboring on. Instead of training for years as a watchmaker, an unskilled worker can get a job at a watch factory pressing buttons to seal pieces together. The worker does not care if he is making watches or cars, simply that the job exists. In the same way, a worker may not even know or care what product he is contributing to. A worker on a Ford assembly line may spend all day installing windows on car doors without ever seeing the rest of the car. A cannery worker can spend a lifetime cleaning fish without ever knowing what product they are used for.

Alienation from the process of one's labor. A worker does not control the conditions of her job because she does not own the means of production. If a person is hired to work in a fast food restaurant, she is expected to make the food the way she is taught. All ingredients must be combined in a particular order and in a particular quantity; there is no room for creativity or change. An employee at Burger King cannot decide to change the spices used on the fries in the same way that an employee on a Ford assembly line cannot decide to place a car's headlights in a different position. Everything is decided by the bourgeoisie who then dictate orders to the laborers.

Alienation from others. Workers compete, rather than cooperate. Employees vie for time slots, bonuses, and job security. Even when a worker clocks out at night and goes home, the competition does not end. As Marx commented in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), "No sooner is the exploitation of the laborer by the manufacturer, so far at an end, that he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portion of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker."

Alienation from one's self. A final outcome of industrialization is a loss of connectivity between a worker and her occupation. Because there is nothing that ties a worker to her labor, there is no longer a sense of self. Instead of being able to take pride in an identity such as being a watchmaker, automobile builder, or chef, a person is simply a cog in the machine.

Taken as a whole, then, alienation in modern society means that an individual has no control over his life. Even in feudal societies, a person controlled the manner of his labor as to when and how it was carried out. But why, then, does the modern working class not rise up and rebel? (Indeed, Marx predicted that this would be the ultimate outcome and collapse of capitalism.)

Another idea that Marx developed is the concept of **false consciousness**. False consciousness is a condition in which the beliefs, ideals, or ideology of a person are not in the person's own best interest. In fact, it is the ideology of the dominant class (here, the bourgeoisie capitalists) that is imposed upon the proletariat. Ideas such as the emphasis of competition over cooperation, or of hard work being its own reward, clearly benefit the owners of industry. Therefore, workers are less likely to question their place in society and assume individual responsibility for existing conditions.

In order for society to overcome false consciousness, Marx proposed that it be replaced with **class consciousness**, the awareness of one's rank in society. Instead of existing as a "class in itself," the proletariat must become a "class for itself" in order to produce social change (Marx and Engels 1848), meaning that instead of just being an inert strata of society, the class could become an advocate for social improvements. Only once society entered this state of political consciousness would it be ready for a social revolution.



Figure 8: An assembly line worker installs car parts with the aid of complex machinery. Has technology made this type of labor more or less alienating? (Photo courtesy of Carol Highsmith/Wikimedia Commons)

Max Weber and Symbolic Interactionism

While Karl Marx may be one of the best-known thinkers of the 19th century, Max Weber is certainly one of the greatest influences in the field of sociology. Like the other social thinkers discussed here, he was concerned with the important changes taking place in Western society with the advent of industrialization. And, like Marx and Durkheim, he feared that industrialization would have negative effects on individuals.

Weber's primary focus on the structure of society lay in the elements of class, status, and power. Similar to Marx, Weber saw class as economically determined. Society, he believed, was split between owners and laborers. Status, on the other hand, was based on noneconomic factors such as education, kinship, and religion. Both status and class determined an individual's power, or influence over ideas. Unlike Marx, Weber believed that these ideas formed the base of society.

Weber's analysis of modern society centered on the concept of **rationalization**. A rational society is one built around logic and efficiency rather than morality or tradition.

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m42986/latest/?collection=col11407/1.7>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/soc101/>

Attributed to: Rice University and OpenStax College



Saylor.org
Page 14 of 22

To Weber, capitalism is entirely rational. Although this leads to efficiency and merit-based success, it can have negative effects when taken to the extreme. In some modern societies, this is seen when rigid routines and strict design lead to a mechanized work environment and a focus on producing identical products in every location.

Another example of the extreme conditions of rationality can be found in Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* (1936). Chaplin's character performs a routine task to the point where he cannot stop his motions even while away from the job. Indeed, today we even have a recognized medical condition that results from such tasks, known as "repetitive stress syndrome."

Weber was also unlike his predecessors in that he was more interested in how individuals experienced societal divisions than in the divisions themselves. The symbolic interactionism theory, the third of the three most recognized theories of sociology, is based on Weber's early ideas that emphasize the viewpoint of the individual and how that individual relates to society. For Weber, the culmination of industrialization, rationalization, and the like results in what he referred to as the **iron cage**, in which the individual is trapped by institutions and bureaucracy. This leads to a sense of "disenchantment of the world," a phrase Weber used to describe the final condition of humanity. Indeed a dark prediction, but one that has, at least to some degree, been borne out (Gerth and Mills 1918). In a rationalized, modern society, we have supermarkets instead of family-owned stores. We have chain restaurants instead of local eateries. Superstores that offer a multitude of merchandise have replaced independent businesses that focused on one product line, such as hardware, groceries, automotive repair, or clothing. Shopping malls offer retail stores, restaurants, fitness centers, even condominiums. This change may be rational, but is it universally desirable?



Figure 9: Cubicles are used to maximize individual workspace in an office. Such structures may be rational, but they are also isolating. (Photo courtesy of Tim Patterson/flickr)

The Protestant Work Ethic:

In a series of essays in 1904, Weber presented the idea of the Protestant work ethic, a new attitude toward work based on the Calvinist principle of predestination. In the 16th century, Europe was shaken by the Protestant Revolution. Religious leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin argued against the Catholic Church's belief in salvation through obedience. While Catholic leaders emphasized the importance of religious dogma and performing good deeds as a gateway to heaven, Protestants believed that inner grace, or faith in God, was enough to achieve salvation.

John Calvin in particular popularized the Christian concept of predestination, the idea that all events – including salvation – have already been decided by God. Because followers were never sure whether they had been chosen to enter Heaven or Hell, they looked for signs in their everyday lives. If a person was hard-working and successful, he was likely to be one of the chosen. If a person was lazy or simply indifferent, he was likely to be one of the damned.

Weber argued that this mentality encouraged people to work hard for personal gain; after all, why should one help the unfortunate if they were already damned? Over time, the Protestant work ethic spread and became the foundation for capitalism.

Summary

Émile Durkheim believed that as societies advance, they make the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity. For Karl Marx, society exists in terms of class conflict. With the rise of capitalism, workers become alienated from themselves and others in society. Sociologist Max Weber noted that the rationalization of society can be taken to unhealthy extremes.

Further Research

One of the most influential pieces of writing in modern history was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*. Visit this site to read the original document that spurred revolutions around the world:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

References

Durkheim, Émile. 1960 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by George Simpson. New York: Free Press.

Durkheim, Émile. 1982 [1895]. *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. Translated by W. D. Halls. New York: Free Press.

Geographia. 1998. "The Bedouin Way." Geograpia.com. Retrieved January 4, 2012 (<http://www.geographia.com/egypt/sinai/bedouin02.htm>).

Engels, Friedrich. 1892. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

Gerth, H. H. and C. Wright Mills. 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1998 [1848]. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Penguin Group.

Glossary

alienation: an individual's isolation from his society, his work, and his sense of self

anomie: a situation in which society no longer has the support of a firm collective consciousness

bourgeoisie: the owners of the means of production in a society

class consciousness: awareness of one's rank in society

collective conscience: the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society

false consciousness: a person's beliefs and ideology are in conflict with her best interests

iron cage: a situation in which an individual is trapped by social institutions

mechanical solidarity: a type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture

organic solidarity: a type of social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences

proletariat: the laborers in a society

rationalization: a belief that modern society should be built around logic and efficiency rather than morality or tradition

social integration: how strongly a person is connected to his or her social group

4.4 Social Constructions of Reality

Summary:

- Understand the sociological concept of reality as a social construct
- Define roles and describe their place in people's daily interactions
- Explain how individuals present themselves and perceive themselves in a social context



Figure 10: Who are we? What role do we play in society? According to sociologists, we construct reality through our interactions with others. In a way, our day-to-day interactions are like those of actors on a stage. (Photo courtesy of Jan Lewandowski/flickr)

Until now, we've primarily discussed the differences between societies. Rather than discuss their problems and configurations, we'll now explore how society came to be and how sociologists view social interaction.

In 1966 sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book called *The Social Construction of Reality*. In it, they argued that society is created by humans and human interaction, which they call **habitualization**. Habitualization describes how "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be ... performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Not only do we construct our own society, but we accept it as it is because others have created it before us. Society is, in fact, "habit."

For example, your school exists as a school and not just as a building because you and others agree that it is a school. If your school is older than you are, it was created by the agreement of others before you. In a sense, it exists by consensus, both prior and current. This is an example of the process of **institutionalization**, the act of implanting a convention or norm into society. Bear in mind that the institution, while socially constructed, is still quite real.

Another way of looking at this concept is through W.I. Thomas's notable **Thomas theorem** which states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928). That is, people's behavior can be determined by their subjective construction of reality rather than by objective reality. For example, a teenager who is repeatedly given a label – overachiever, player, bum – might live up to the term even though it initially wasn't a part of his character.

Like Berger and Luckmann's description of habitualization, Thomas states that our moral codes and social norms are created by "successive definitions of the situation." This concept is defined by sociologist Robert K. Merton as a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. Merton explains that with a self-fulfilling prophecy, even a false idea can become true if it is acted upon. One example he gives is of a "bank run." Say for some reason, a

number of people falsely fear that their bank is soon to be bankrupt. Because of this false notion, people run to their bank and demand all their cash at once. As banks rarely, if ever, have that much money on hand, the bank does indeed run out of money, fulfilling the customers' prophecy. Here, reality is constructed by an idea.

Symbolic interactionists offer another lens through which to analyze the social construction of reality. With a theoretical perspective focused on the symbols (like language, gestures, and artifacts) that people use to interact, this approach is interested in how people interpret those symbols in daily interactions. For example, we might feel fright at seeing a person holding a gun, unless, of course, it turns out to be a police officer. Interactionists also recognize that language and body language reflect our values. One has only to learn a foreign tongue to know that not every English word can be easily translated into another language. The same is true for gestures. While Americans might recognize a "thumbs up" as meaning "great," in Germany it would mean "one" and in Japan it would mean "five." Thus, our construction of reality is influenced by our symbolic interactions.



Figure 11: The story line of a self-fulfilling prophecy appears in many literary works, perhaps most famously in the story of Oedipus. Oedipus is told by an oracle that he will murder his father and marry his mother. In going out of his way to avoid his fate, Oedipus inadvertently fulfills it. Oedipus's story illustrates one way in which members of society contribute to the social construction of reality. (Photo courtesy of Jean-Antoine-Theodore Giroust/Wikimedia Commons)

Roles and Status

As you can imagine, people employ many types of behaviors in day-to-day life. **Roles** are patterns of behavior that we recognize in each other that are representative of a person's social status. Currently, while reading this text, you are playing the role of a student. However, you also play other roles in your life, such as "daughter," "neighbor," or "employee." These various roles are each associated with a different status.

Sociologists use the term **status** to describe the responsibilities and benefits a person experiences according to their rank and role in society. Some statuses are **ascribed** – those you do not select, such as son, elderly person, or female. Others, called

achieved statuses, are obtained by choice, such as a high school dropout, self-made millionaire, or nurse. As a daughter or son, you occupy a different status than as a neighbor or employee. One person can be associated with a multitude of roles and statuses. Even a single status such as “student” has a complex **role-set**, or array of roles, attached to it (Merton 1957).

If too much is required of a single role, individuals can experience **role strain**. Consider the duties of a parent: cooking, cleaning, driving, problem-solving, acting as a source of moral guidance – the list goes on. Similarly, a person can experience **role conflict** when one or more roles are contradictory. A parent who also has a full-time career can experience role conflict on a daily basis. When there is a deadline at the office but a sick child needs to be picked up from school, which comes first? When you are working toward a promotion but your children want you to come to their school play, which do you choose? Being a college student can conflict with being an employee, being an athlete, or even being a friend. Our roles in life have a great effect on our decisions and who we become.

Presentation of Self

Of course, it is impossible to look inside a person’s head and study what role they are playing. All we can observe is behavior, or role performance. **Role performance** is how a person expresses his or her role. Sociologist Erving Goffman presented the idea that a person is like an actor on a stage. Calling his theory dramaturgy, Goffman believed that we use “impression management” to present ourselves to others as we hope to be perceived. Each situation is a new scene, and individuals perform different roles depending on who is present (Goffman 1959). Think about the way you behave around your coworkers versus the way you behave around your grandparents versus the way you behave with a blind date. Even if you’re not consciously trying to alter your personality, your grandparents, coworkers, and date probably see different sides of you.

As in a play, the setting matters as well. If you have a group of friends over to your house for dinner, you are playing the role of a host. It is agreed upon that you will provide food and seating and probably be stuck with a lot of the cleanup at the end of the night. Similarly, your friends are playing the roles of guests, and they are expected to respect your property and any rules you may set forth (“Don’t leave the door open or the cat will get out.”). In any scene, there needs to be a shared reality between players. In this case, if you view yourself as a guest and others view you as a host, there are likely to be problems.

Impression management is a critical component of symbolic interactionism. For example, a judge in a courtroom has many “props” to create an impression of fairness, gravity, and control – like her robe and gavel. Those entering the courtroom are expected to adhere to the scene being set. Just imagine the “impression” that can be made by how a person dresses. This is the reason that attorneys frequently select the hairstyle and apparel for witnesses and defendants in courtroom proceedings.

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m42986/latest/?collection=col11407/1.7>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/soc101/>



Figure 12: A courtroom exemplifies a scene where all players have clearly defined roles and expected performances. (Photo courtesy of John Marino/flicker)

Goffman's dramaturgy ideas expand on the ideas of Charles Cooley and the **looking-glass self**. According to Cooley, we base our image on what we think other people see (Cooley 1902). We imagine how we must appear to others, then react to this speculation. We don certain clothes, prepare our hair in a particular manner, wear makeup, use cologne, and the like – all with the notion that our presentation of ourselves is going to affect how others perceive us. We expect a certain reaction, and, if lucky, we get the one we desire and feel good about it. But more than that, Cooley believed that our sense of self is based upon this idea: we imagine how we look to others, draw conclusions based upon their reactions to us, and then we develop our personal sense of self. In other words, people's reactions to us are like a mirror in which we are reflected.

Summary

Society is based on the social construction of reality. How we define society influences how society actually is. Likewise, how we see other people influences their actions as well as our actions toward them. We all take on various roles throughout our lives, and our social interactions depend on what types of roles we assume, who we assume them with, and the scene where interaction takes place.

Further Research

TV Tropes is a website where users identify concepts that are commonly used in literature, film, and other media. Although its tone is for the most part humorous, the site provides a good jumping-off point for research. Browse the list of examples under the entry of "self-fulfilling prophecy." Pay careful attention to the real-life examples. Are there ones that surprised you or that you don't agree with?

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SelfFulfillingProphecy>

References

Berger, P. L. and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Cooley, Charles H. 1902. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Scribner's.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.

Merton, Robert K. 1957. "The Role-Set: Problems in Sociological Theory." *British Journal of Sociology* 8(2):110–113.

Thomas, W.I. and D.S. Thomas. 1928. *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. New York: Knopf.

Glossary

achieved status: the status a person chooses, such as a level of education or income

ascribed status: the status outside of an individual's control, such as sex or race

habitualization: the idea that society is constructed by us and those before us, and it is followed like a habit

institutionalization: the act of implanting a convention or norm into society

looking-glass self: our reflection of how we think we appear to others

roles: patterns of behavior that are representative of a person's social status

role-set: an array of roles attached to a particular status

role conflict: when one or more of an individual's roles clash

role performance: the expression of a role

role strain: stress that occurs when too much is required of a single role

self-fulfilling prophecy: an idea that becomes true when acted upon

status: the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society

Thomas theorem: how a subjective reality can drive events to develop in accordance with that reality, despite being originally unsupported by objective reality