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Sociology

Modernity and Sociological Theory

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Teaching Notes

Sociology and Modernity

"Sociology", according to **Taylor** (2000), "is a product of modernity"; its origins as an academic discipline can be found in the development of modern societies and to understand why this is significant, we need to think about how and why we classify social development.

Conventionally, therefore, it's usual to talk about our society in terms of:

• **Pre-modernity -** a type of society existing before the late 16th century

• **Modernity -** a type that developed out of the pre-modern period and which stretches to the late 20th century.

• **Postmodernity** – a type considered by some sociologists to be characteristic of our society in the early 21st century.

It's important to note that not all sociologists agree with either this term or with the claim that it represents a new form of social development. **Giddens** (1998) and **Habermas** (1992), for example, refer to this period as 'high' or 'late' modernity. We will, however, use this term throughout this set of notes.

Although this type of simple classification needs to be treated with care - there's a tendency to see categories as hard-and-fast periods - where one ends another begins - whereas in reality we may still, for example, find characteristics of one period coexisting for a time with characteristics of another period.

We can, however, use this very basic classification to identify some key features of modern society that arguably differentiate it from both its pre- and postmodern counterparts. Once we've done this we can then examine how modernity relates to different types of sociological theorising.

Economic Characteristics

Modernity differs from *pre-modernity* in a number of ways:

Technology: The invention of machines – and the gradual discovery / invention of new sources of power (gas, electricity and nuclear, for example) – opened up the potential for **industrialisation –** the application of machine technology to the production of things (*commodities*).

People working with machines (*mechanisation*) led to the development of factories that allowed large quantities of goods to be produced quickly, cheaply and to the same general standard (*mass production*). Further developments included *automation* (machines controlling other machines, with little or no direct human involvement) and, most recently, the *computerisation* of some production processes.

Alongside these developments, modern society is characterised by:

Capitalist economic relationships ('employer–employee', for example) that involve a process of **rationalisation**, in the sense of ideas about organisation and efficiency being applied to the production process. As **Sarup** (1993) puts it, modernity involves

'…the progressive economic and administrative rationalisation of the social world'.

For **Weber** (1905), rationalisation involved *institutions* (such as work) and *practices* becoming increasingly well organised and efficient. Examples of different types of economic rationalisation include:

• **Fordism**: Named after the production line technique developed by the US car manufacturer Henry Ford at the beginning of the 20th century. With this technique a complex task, such as assembling a car, is broken down into a number of smaller, relatively simple tasks.

• **Global Fordism**: Where *Fordism* involves production-line principles applied *within* a factory, this version involves different parts of a product being created in different countries (where labour and parts may be relatively inexpensive) and assembled in yet another country.

• **Just-in-time** (JIT): Involves bringing together the parts needed to create a product 'just in time' to sell the completed product (thereby saving on things like storage costs).

For **Weber**, a further feature that developed alongside *rationalisation* was **bureaucracy**, which **Ritzer** (1996) describes as

'a large-scale organization composed of a hierarchy of offices…people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and…compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions'.

A final characteristic we can add (with the proviso that there is some dispute as to whether this is characteristic of *modernity* or *postmodernity*) is **globalisation**, considered in terms of ideas such as:

• **Global Fordism**.

• **Transnational corporations** that operate and trade on a global scale. Areas such as *telecommunications* (BT, for example) and *computer software* (think Microsoft – which sounds a bit like subliminal advertising) are contemporary examples of global marketplaces for transnational companies.

Political Characteristics

Modernity involves ideas like:

• **Nation states**: Although 'a nation' may exist in some pre-modern societies, a *nation state* is a feature of modernity – the basic idea being that *states* develop systems of national government with some form of political representation (a parliament, for example), legal system, civil service and fixed geographic borders.

• **Representation**: This doesn't have to be *democratic* – many early-modern nation states involved monarchies, and even into the 20th century a range of totalitarian societies have existed (Germany, Italy, Spain and the USSR, for example), but political democracy is a feature of most Western societies in the 21st century.

If we turn the focus slightly to the idea of *modernity* itself (as a way of thinking about and understanding the social and natural worlds), we can explore the **cultural** characteristics of modern society, mainly because modernity involved major changes in the way people experience and interpret the world (something that led to the development of both sociology and many other forms of intellectual endeavour).

Cultural Characteristics

The obvious place to start here is with the concept of **belief systems** which, for our current purpose, we can examine in terms of **The Enlightenment**. **Harvey** (1990) argues the origins of *modernity* as a belief are in the explosion of creative thinking and practice that began in late-17th century Europe.

As **Scambler** and **Higgs** (1998) argue:

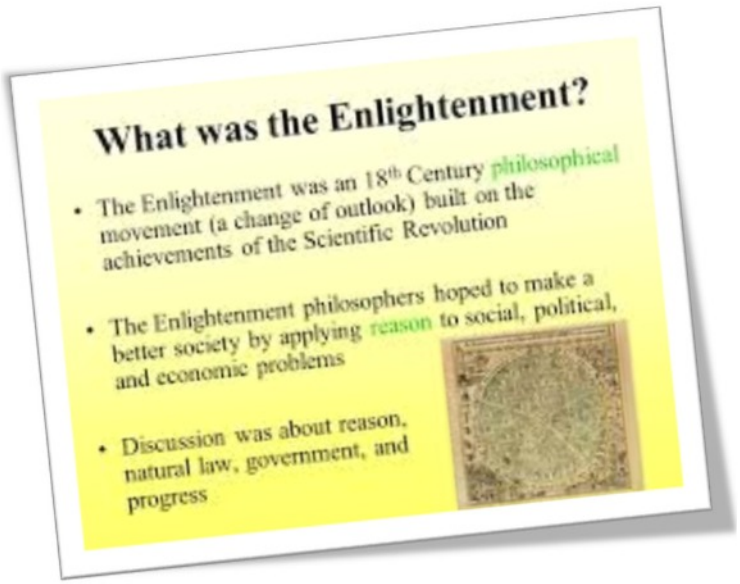
'Modernity refers to Western society over the past 200 years, with its triumphs of medicine and science, beliefs in social progress and improvement, and the emergence of mass institutions such as hospitals, schools, and the nation state, as well as mass production. Social theory . . . has its roots in the project of modernity.'

The philosopher and social reformer Thomas **Paine** (1795) called the Enlightenment the '**Age of Reason**', with good reason (*pun intended*) because it involved rejecting the 'ignorance and superstition' of pre-modernity and embracing a rational understanding of the natural and social worlds – an idea that introduces a major defining feature of modernity - **science.** For **O'Donnell** (1997) modernity is:

'…a period during which science and reason become the main means by which human beings seek to understand the world and solve problems…modernity is driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand and change, in short, to master the world'

and the impact of scientific thought was – and continues to be – felt in terms of **objectivity.** Scientific beliefs involve the idea that it's possible to both discover and create knowledge through objective observations.

In other words, both the natural world (the object of study) and the scientific method are based on **foundational principles** or assumptions. In the former, the world is subject to 'laws' governing behaviour and in the latter, objective science can be used to discover these laws (based, for example, on the foundational principle of 'cause and effect').



Science, therefore, is a very powerful method of explaining the world, for two reasons:

1. Truth can be separated from fallacy (*fiction*). A classic example is the religious suppression of Galileo's argument that the Earth revolved around the Sun (and not the other way around, as the Catholic Church hierarchy believed). For a time this idea was successfully suppressed, but its *demonstrable truth* was simply too powerful to deny. Under modernity, therefore, *objective truths* replace *subjective faiths* as the primary form of explanation.

2. Instrumental utility: **Keat** and **Urry** (1975) note that one of the most powerful features of science is that 'it works'; scientific thinking and principles have a use in the 'real world' of cars, computers and compact disks. From this, it's only a short step to the notion of:

Progress – the idea that, as we understand more and more about the natural world, modern society is constantly 'moving forward' – from superstition to science, ignorance to knowledge and, finally, from subservience to mastery of nature.

Once the natural world has been 'mastered' (or at least its foundational principles understood), it's but a small step to the idea of mastery of the social world; if the inanimate world of 'things' is governed by natural laws, perhaps the same is true of the animated world of people?

Modernity and Sociological Theory

Given sociology's origins in 'the modern period', it's not surprising that the founders of the discipline (writers such as **Saint- Simon**, **Comte** and **Durkheim** in France, **Weber** and **Marx** in Germany and **Spencer** in England) were immersed in the general philosophies and principles of modernist social thought. As **Lechner** (1998) notes:

> *'Modernity is the central concern of sociology as a discipline…In its early period, sociology aimed to illuminate…the changes that were remaking Europe and America …it dealt with the consequences of industrialization and urbanization in leading nation-states…[as] part of a broader debate about the meaning of social change.'*

Sociology in the early modern period (from **Saint-Simon** onwards) was concerned with the description and explanation of modernity and its associated processes. To paraphrase **O'Donnell** (1997), sociology was initially driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand, change and – possibly – master the social world.

In this section, therefore, we're going to explore a couple of areas:

1. Themes: involves relating some of the basic concepts of 'modernist sociology' to the cultural themes of modernity we outlined above.

2. Perspectives: we can examine *consensus*, *conflict* and *social action* theories and their relationship to both *modernity* and *postmodernity*.

Themes

In terms of the first of these ideas, therefore, in many of the classic texts of 'modernist sociology' we can see the basic themes of 18th/19th century thought:

Science represents one of the key ideas for classical sociology, since sociology, as the 'science of society', was founded on a number of *assumptions* that dovetailed neatly with modernity. These included:

Structure over **action**: Just as behavior in the natural world was subject to certain *objective forces* (laws of gravity, for example), social behaviour was subject to 'social forces' that pushed people into *actions*. Different sociologists did, of course, have different views about the nature and extent of these forces:

• **Consensus** theorists focused on forces of *order* and *stability.* **Comte**, for example, saw in sociology the attempt to isolate laws governing social behaviour, while **Durkheim** was interested in discovering laws governing both *social statics* (order) and *dynamics* (change).

• **Conflict** theorists focused on forces of *conflict* and *change.* **Marx**, for example, saw class struggle as the motor or historical change.

Whatever their difference of emphasis and approach, the underlying belief was similar: social forces could be discovered using scientific methods (such as detailed *observation*, *theory* development and *objective testing)* – a belief that reflected an underlying modernist certainty that 'the truth', to coin a phrase, was 'Out There Somewhere'. The task of *any* scientist was to find it.

If human behaviour was subject to 'underlying forces', therefore, this presupposed:

Regularity: There was a *logic* to behaviour based on the various ways cultural behaviour was structured by 'unseen forces' that could be:

- **Theorised**: If behaviour isn't random, unstructured and meaningless, it follows that we can speculate about its causes.

- **Observed** in terms of its effects, using various indicators. An indicator of secularisation, for example, might be declining church attendance. In dealing with objective forces, observation had to be similarly objective, structured and free from subjective judgements. In other words, it had to be:

Empirical: *Objectivity* and *value freedom* are, for modernist theory, non-negotiable; if the aim is to find undiscovered or obscured truth, scientists must be objective since, if they were not, we could not be certain a truth had really been discovered.

Essentialism: All varieties of early modern sociology contained a belief in human behaviour/societies having fundamental (*essential*) organisational features, an idea reflected in the concept of:

Progress: For both consensus and conflict sociology the idea of a progressive revelation of 'scientific truths' was a fundamental goal. In this respect, the concept of *progress* is found in much of classical sociology – from writers as diverse as:

- **Saint-Simon** (***Fonseca*** and ***Ussher*** (1999) point to his call, in the early eighteenth century, for a 'science of society' having parity with the natural sciences),
- **Comte** (and his vision of society governed by a 'scientific priesthood' based on their understanding and mastery of the 'laws of human behaviour'),
- **Marx** (with his scientific critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and the vision of a future, communist society) and
- **Weber** (who saw the rational ordering of society as an achievable goal).

Finally, we can note how classical sociology gave rise to two forms of scientific *methodology*:

• **positivism**, mainly associated with *consensus* sociology, and

• **realism**, mainly associated with *conflict* sociology.

Modernist sociology, as we've suggested, has historically been dominated by *structuralist perspectives*, the basic themes of which we can review next.

Consensus Structuralism

This perspective involves, for **Giddens** (2001), a focus on the way agreement over 'basic social values by the members of a group, community or society' is both socially constructed and a fundamental characteristic of social behaviour. The persistence of society, therefore, is based around a:

Common value system involving 'consensual beliefs held by the majority of the population'. Value systems are organized around:

Social institutions – patterns of shared, stable behaviour that persist over time and around which modern societies are structured in terms of:

• **economic** institutions (work, for example)
• **political** institutions (government, police, judiciary, and so forth)
• **cultural** institutions (such as religion, education and the media).

Each institution (or set of related institutions) is *functional* for society because they are connected by their:

• **Purpose** – what each institution exists to do (the function of economic institutions is to provide the physical means to survive; the function of the family is primary socialisation, and so forth).

• **Needs** – what each institution takes from other institutions in order to function. Work, for example, needs the family to produce socialised individuals and, in return, provides the means of family group survival.

This perspective is related to three main themes of modernism:

1. Foundationalism: The concept of *function* – the basic *foundation* on which consensus theory rests – takes a number of forms, an example of which is:

• **Functional imperative** (a command that must be obeyed): Each social institution is functionally connected to other, related institutions on the basis of the functions they must perform if a society is to survive and prosper (*purpose* and *needs*, in other words).

2. Structure: Because institutions are *functionally linked*, we experience society in terms of pressures and constraints on our behaviour (the pressure to work, form a family, and so forth). In this respect, society is a *hidden hand* pushing people to perform the roles required for the reproduction of a social order that **Durkheim** (1895) identified as having two significant aspects:

• **Social solidarity** – the feeling we both belong to a society and have certain basic things in common: culture, socialisation, values, norms, roles and the like.

• **Collective conscience** or the 'external expression' of the will of the people. This is the force that binds people to each other as a society (to integrate them into collective forms of behaviour).

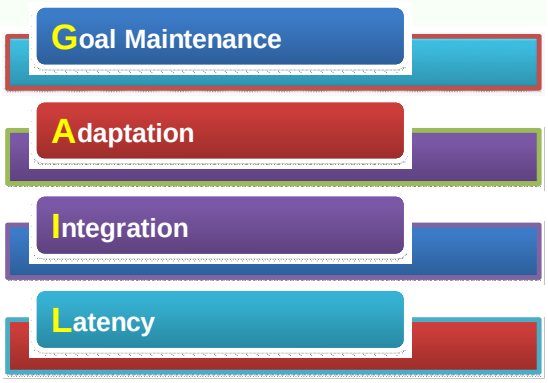
3. Essentialism: **Parsons** (1951) argued that every institution needs to solve four *essential problems* if it is to exist and function:

• **Goal attainment** involves the need to set behavioural goals and to specify the means through which they can be achieved.

• **Adaptation** involves creating the means to achieve valued goals. This may, for example, involve the ability to provide the *physical necessities* of institutional life.

• **Integration**: People need to feel a part of any institution and one way to achieve this is to provide something they have in common, such as norms and values. The ability of an institution to successfully integrate people is crucial for its internal harmony and reproduction.

• **Latency** (or pattern maintenance) refers to the development of *social control* mechanisms to manage tensions, motivate people, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and so forth.



Conflict Structuralism

This focuses, according to **Bilton et al.** (1996) on:

'the notion that society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterised by a conflict of interests between the advantaged

and the disadvantaged'.

It encompasses perspectives such as ***Marxism*** (conflict between social *classes*) and ***feminism*** (gender conflicts) and can be related to the main themes of modernism in terms of:

1. Foundationalism: Conflicts of interest are central to this perspective. For Marxists, a key term is **social class**, where class conflict creates social change through the opposition of classes as they pursue their different *collective* interests. For Marxists, classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the **means of production** – the social process whereby goods are created.

For *traditional* Marxism, capitalist society consists of two great classes:

• **the bourgeoisie** – those who own and control the means of production
• **the proletariat** – those who sell their labour power in the economic marketplace.

Contemporary forms of (Neo-) Marxism, however, tend to note the existence of **class fractions** (subdivisions of each main class). For example, the bourgeoisie (or ruling class) might be subdivided into the:

• **haute (high) bourgeoisie** (owners of large companies)
• **petit (small) bourgeoisie** (owners of small businesses)
• **professionals** (such as academics or managers who control the day-to-day running of companies).

2. Essentialism: Different forms of conflict theory have slightly different essential features.

- Marxism, for example, focuses on areas such as the economic structure of society as the key to understanding human behaviour and development.

- Radical feminists, meanwhile, focus on the essential features of males and females in terms of, for example, their different psychologies.

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