Sociological theory and analysis
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Undergraduate study in
Economics, Management,
Finance and the Social Sciences

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Chapter 1: Introduction

163 Sociological theory and analysis is a ‘200’ course offered on the Economics, Management, Finance and the Social Sciences (EMFSS) suite of programmes. I would like to welcome you to the study of sociological theory and analysis, which I hope you will find an intellectually stimulating and rewarding aspect of sociology. Although you may feel that sociological theory is rather an abstract subject, this is not a course about the history of ideas! Rather, it is a critical introduction to the basic concepts and substantive theory of sociology, which focuses on the analysis of issues that are part of your everyday experience – social relations and how individuals interact with one another, the nature of ideas, culture and how institutions shape our lives. I hope that it raises interesting and pertinent questions about these and other areas. During this course you will learn to examine theories and ideas in relation to one another and in relation to the context in which they emerged. You should find that studying this course will enable you to ask questions and raise issues about the nature of contemporary societies. I hope you will find studying the course both an enjoyable and illuminating experience.

Prerequisites

If taken as part of a BSc degree, you must pass 21 Principles of sociology before attempting this course.

Aims and objectives

This syllabus is specifically concerned with examining the development of sociological theory from its beginnings in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its subsequent development in the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber to modern sociological theory, including sociological functionalism, interactionism, contemporary Marxism(s), structuralism and post-structuralism, postmodernism and globalisation. The underlying structure of the syllabus is chronological. Specifically the aims of the course are to:

• examine the development of the main intellectual trends of sociological theory to the present day and to introduce you to the types of analysis that are integral to them
• enable you to recognise and understand the key problems that sociological theorists have addressed in the formulation of their theories
• examine the relationship between sociological theory and empirical research and other forms of analysis in sociology.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the course, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• recognise, describe and discuss a wide range of sociological theories
• discuss the importance of theory to sociological research
• outline and discuss the way core issues continue to inform the production of sociological theory
• discuss the ways that social, political, and economic change prompts revisions and new directions in theoretical understandings
• explain the links between sociological theory and sociological analysis.

Syllabus

The ‘Classical’ tradition: The emergence of social theory in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its development through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and in the emerging discipline of sociology.

Twentieth-century developments: The development and expansion of sociological theory in functionalism and structural functionalism, social action theory, symbolic interactionism, critical theory and the Frankfurt School particularly in the works of Parsons, Mead, Garfinkel, Goffman, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens.

New directions: The impact of post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas and the consequences of the ‘cultural turn’ in sociological thought, along with new directions in sociological theory prompted by the intensification of processes of globalisation and capitalisation. Attention will be given to contemporary social thought particularly in the work of Foucault, Lash and Urry, Castells, and Hardt and Negri.

How to use this subject guide

The aim of this subject guide is to help you to interpret the syllabus. It outlines what you are expected to know for each area of the syllabus and suggests relevant readings to help you to understand the material.

Much of the information you need to learn and understand is contained in examples and activities within the subject guide itself and you are expected, as far as possible, to attempt each of the activities.

Recommendation for study time

You will benefit most from this course by studying actively. This means using the exercises available in the chapters to build a developed understanding of the content of this course: both the content made available in this guide and that which appears in the Essential reading section of each chapter. You are encouraged to read key materials more than once, and alongside this to write about them in order to develop your own independent understanding of the course content.

If you are intending to study for the examination for this course over the course of one academic year, you need to study for a minimum of six hours per week. This study can include activities such as reading the subject guide, the Essential and Further reading, making notes and practising writing answers to examination questions.

Reading advice

I would recommend that you work through the guide in chapter order. To a large extent, the chapters follow on from each other in chronological order. You should read the whole of each suggested chapter or chapter section in Callinicos’ Social Theory before you begin the relevant chapter in the subject guide (as indicated in Essential reading at the head of each chapter). Then follow the instructions throughout the subject guide chapters to read specific pages or sections in detail as you progress.

1 Full details of this text are given in the Essential reading section in this chapter.
through it. In this way, you should develop a sound understanding of the specific subject of each chapter and be able to relate it to wider arguments and ideas and understand its context.

However, the most important readings that you will need to refer to while studying this course are the original texts contained in the two volumes *Classical Sociological Theory* and *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. These are extracts from the work of the sociologists and social theorists that we are studying on the course. Wherever possible, it is encouraged that you read the sociologists' original work beyond the extracts offered in Calhoun. Many of the extracts of original works contain complex arguments and ideas and use specialist vocabulary. I recommend that you purchase a good dictionary of sociology to help you define specific words and understand particular concepts. I have recommended two dictionaries that you might find useful in the ‘Further reading’ section below. If you are struggling with the readings for this course, please refer to Chapter 4 of *21 Principles of sociology*, to improve your grounding in sociological theory.

Most of the readings of the original texts are tied to specific activities. Usually, I have given you a series of short questions based on the content of each of the extracts. **Please note:** you do not need to answer all of these questions. They are designed to help you focus on the reading. The questions are there to make sure that you keep stopping to think about what is written and to make sure that you understand as much of what you have read as possible. The main purpose of the questions is to help you break down complex arguments and ideas into manageable sections. Remember, often when encountering a new and unfamiliar text it is difficult to grasp an argument the first and even the second time that you read it through. Reading is a process and the more time and attention that you give to a text the more you will get out of it.

A word of warning, however, before you begin! If you think that the texts that you have been set to read will be **too** difficult, **too** complicated, or even **too** boring then you will be fighting a losing battle with them. Writers do not set out to baffle, confuse or bore their readers. If, however, you approach the task of reading with an open mind and a determination to discover useful, important and above all **interesting** information about a topic, you will find that it is relatively easy to overcome any initial difficulties. In this sense, reading academic articles, chapters and books successfully depends on developing a positive attitude to the task. It is worth doing this as quickly as you can as the benefits are clear. Students who read widely **always** get better marks than those who do not. And as an additional benefit, they also tend to get much more out of their studies!

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**Essential reading**

For this course you need to purchase three textbooks:


It is crucial that you buy all three of these books **before** you begin studying for this course. You will not be able to use the subject guide properly unless you have the books.
Detailed reading references in this subject guide refer to the editions of the set textbooks listed above. New editions of one or more of these textbooks may have been published by the time you study this course. You can use a more recent edition of any of the books; use the detailed chapter and section headings and the index to identify relevant readings. Also check the virtual learning environment (VLE) regularly for updated guidance on readings.

**Strategic approaches to reading**

So how is it possible to become more engaged with and more confident about approaching set reading? Generally it helps to have a strategic approach to any aspect of studying, and reading is no exception. The following list contains tips and suggestions based on the experiences and comments of numerous students over the years. You may find some or all of it useful. But remember these are suggestions and not rules!

- Don't worry or panic – distance yourself from the text you are reading and mentally approach it afresh.
- Any text is invariably an argument made up of several stages – look for the structure and essence of the argument.
- Consider what the writer is saying, how they are saying it, what steps they follow, what the turns are in their logic or argument.
- When you come across an unfamiliar word, concept, phrase or detail, read right through it. Ignore it at first (you can look it up later). Remember that you are **aiming to distil the essence of the argument**. It is important not to get ‘bogged down’ in detail.
- Each sentence and each paragraph is saying something – break up the text into manageable components that you can work with.
- Spend 10 minutes thinking about what you have read and jot down the key – usually four or five – points on one piece of paper.
- Now go back and study the extract carefully, adding briefly to your notes.
- Write down questions and areas that are not clear and look them up later.
- Use whatever learning resources you have available to you – dictionaries, internet access, encyclopaedias, etc. to look up unfamiliar words, ideas, place names, or people that might be referenced in the text. **Bear in mind that your initial task is to try and read through the text to see if you can understand the larger argument it makes. Detailed study can come later, once this has been grasped.**
- If you agree with what the writer is saying, can you identify precisely what you agree with? What did you like about the extract?
- What is not being said in the extract? What seems to be left out?
- Is there something that you disagree with? Can you say clearly why you disagree with it? Is it their opinion? Is there something faulty in their logic or the steps they use in their argument? Is your disagreement more like an unease that you can’t clearly articulate?
- How have the issues addressed by the writer affected debates in the area, if at all? Can you see any links between ideas emerging from your reading and other areas we have covered, or areas you have covered in other courses?

You may wish to supplement your studies by reading further and there are lists of recommended texts (Further reading) at the top of each chapter. The chapters often reference these texts extensively.
Further reading

Please note that as long as you read the Essential reading you are then free to read around the subject area in any text, paper or online resource. You will need to support your learning by reading as widely as possible and by thinking about how these principles apply in the real world. To help you read extensively, you have free access to the VLE and University of London Online Library (see below).

For ease of reference, Appendix 1 of the guide contains a full list of all Further reading listed in this course. The titles listed below are seven books which I particularly recommend for this course.


[ISBN 9780745613147].

Giddens, A. Capitalism and Modern Social Theory. (Cambridge: Cambridge 

Morrison, K. Marx, Durkheim and Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought. 


[ISBN 9780761970880].


Online study resources

In addition to the subject guide and the Essential reading, it is crucial that you take advantage of the study resources that are available online for this course, including the VLE and the Online Library.

You can access the VLE, the Online Library and your University of London email account via the Student Portal at: http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk

You should have received your login details for the Student Portal with your official offer, which was emailed to the address that you gave on your application form. You have probably already logged in to the Student Portal in order to register! As soon as you registered, you will automatically have been granted access to the VLE, Online Library and your fully functional University of London email account.

If you forget your login details at any point, please email uolia.support@london.ac.uk quoting your student number.

The VLE

The VLE, which complements this subject guide, has been designed to enhance your learning experience, providing additional support and a sense of community. It forms an important part of your study experience with the University of London and you should access it regularly.

The VLE provides a range of resources for EMFSS courses:

- Self-testing activities: Doing these allows you to test your own understanding of subject material.
- Electronic study materials: The printed materials that you receive from the University of London are available to download, including updated reading lists and references.

2 George Ritzer has published several texts on sociological theory including a 2008 edition called Classical Sociological Theory, also published by McGraw-Hill. Different editions are listed in this subject guide. However, as this is a classic text, if purchasing a later edition, you should be able to locate the relevant material.
• Past examination papers and Examiners' commentaries: These provide advice on how each examination question might best be answered.

• A student discussion forum: This is an open space for you to discuss interests and experiences, seek support from your peers, work collaboratively to solve problems and discuss subject material.

• Videos: There are recorded academic introductions to the subject, interviews and debates and, for some courses, audio-visual tutorials and conclusions.

• Recorded lectures: For some courses, where appropriate, the sessions from previous years' Study Weekends have been recorded and made available.

• Study skills: Expert advice on preparing for examinations and developing your digital literacy skills.

• Feedback forms.

Some of these resources are available for certain courses only, but we are expanding our provision all the time and you should check the VLE regularly for updates.

Making use of the Online Library

The Online Library contains a huge array of journal articles and other resources to help you read widely and extensively.

To access the majority of resources via the Online Library you will either need to use your University of London Student Portal login details, or you will be required to register and use an Athens login: http://tinyurl.com/ollathens

The easiest way to locate relevant content and journal articles in the Online Library is to use the Summon search engine.

If you are having trouble finding an article listed in a reading list, try removing any punctuation from the title, such as single quotation marks, question marks and colons.

For further advice, please see the online help pages: www.external.shl.lon.ac.uk/summon/about.php

Activities

You will also find a number of tasks in the activities sections of each chapter. These activities ask specific questions about broader aspects of the texts you are reading and ask you to apply the knowledge and ideas that you have gained in longer pieces of writing. It is strongly recommended that you try and do as many of the tasks in each of the chapters as you can. Write out your answers to the short comprehension questions and the longer exercises in a separate work book. Work through each of the activities methodically and in order as this will help you to build up a solid understanding of the text itself and allow you to think about it in a broader context and make connections with other thinkers on the course.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a checklist of your learning outcomes which is a list of the main points that you should understand once you have covered the material in the chapter and the associated readings.
**Structure of the guide**

**Part 1: The classical sociologists**

In this part of the subject guide, we concentrate on the main contributions to sociological theory by the classical sociologists and their attempts to establish sociology as a distinctive discipline. Those of you who are studying this course as part of a BSc degree will already be familiar with the major figures of classical sociology (from *Principles of sociology*) and their broad arguments. Here we concentrate in more detail on the conceptual and substantive issues raised by Enlightenment thinkers and by Marx, Weber and Durkheim. We will explore their different approaches to their societies and their attempts to construct 'sciences' of human society based on the analysis of its basic institutions and the processes of social change.

- In **Chapter 2** we look at the often unexplored question of what a theory actually is and how and why theorising is an important part of all (social) scientific work.
- In **Chapter 3** we examine the emergence of key aspects of later social scientific thought in the period of the Enlightenment. We will look at some key thinkers of the period and at the specific forms of social analysis that they developed. We will also look at the work of the post-Enlightenment theorist Comte and his development of 'positivism' and its impact on the emergence of sociology.
- In **Chapter 4** we look in depth at Marx's main concepts and his general theory of modern capitalism, social and economic change, alienation, and class struggle. We ask how Marx's theory relates to and attempts to move beyond the 'idealistic' thought of Hegel and look at the specific types of analysis that Marx used in the development of his theoretical models.
- In **Chapter 5** we examine Durkheim's attempts to establish sociology as a 'science' of social facts and institutions and at his attempt to define 'society' as a specific and extra-individual entity with its own 'laws'. We look at the forms of analysis that Durkheim used in order to study the effects of the social whole on the individual.
- In **Chapter 6** we look at Weber's critique of 'positivist' social thought and his attempt to develop a theory of social action that was causal and objective while taking into account forms of subjective motivation. We look at Weber's theory of social change and in particular at the development of modern capitalism in the context of his history of 'rationalisation'.

**Part 2: Twentieth-century developments**

In Chapters 7–10 we examine the development of classical social thought into modern sociological theory. Many of the current debates in contemporary sociological theory have their basis in the conceptual and substantive issues first raised by classical social theory.

- In **Chapter 7** we examine the sociological theory of functionalism, which came to dominate sociology in the post-war years. In particular, we look at the work of Talcott Parsons. We explore the problems inherent to functionalist theory and ask how it analyses specific social and cultural phenomena.
- In **Chapter 8** we examine the development of critical theory in the work of the Frankfurt School. We look at the nature of critical theory and its basis in the work of Marx and other theorists and at the specific
context in which it emerged. We consider their influential critique of mass society, instrumental forms of reason and the culture industries.

- In Chapter 9 we explore the emergence of interactionist sociology in symbolic interactionism and in ethnomethodology. We look at the work of Mead, Schutz, Goffman and Garfinkel.

- In Chapter 10 we look at recent attempts in sociological theory to try to bring together the emphasis on systems and structures with the analysis of agent and action. We look, in particular, at the work of Giddens on ‘structuration’ and at Bourdieu on ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ and at how successful these attempts are to reconcile structure and agent, and the micro and macro levels of analysis.

Part 3: New directions

In this section, we look at the impact of post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas and the consequences of the ‘cultural turn’ in sociological thought along with new directions in sociological theory prompted by the intensification of processes of globalisation and capitalisation.

- In Chapter 11 we consider the structuralist and post-structuralist thinking that developed in France in the second half of the twentieth-century and which went on to have a profound influence on the development of new and innovative types of social and cultural analysis through their insistence on the importance of language and ‘discourse’. We look in particular at the work of Michel Foucault.

- In Chapter 12 we explore some recent developments in social theory. We look at arguments and ideas that suggested that modernity itself had become a redundant category for theory and analysis and at arguments against this position. We explore some of the important social and economic changes that have taken place over the last three decades. In particular, we look at the impact of globalisation, ‘post-Fordism’ and the new cultural economy and at attempts to provide a theoretical perspective on them.

Causes and consequences of methodological individualism

1. Weber famously dealt with the issue of ‘methodological individualism’ in the first chapter of Economy and Society. However, it is a standpoint that also arises in disciplines such as economics, psychology and philosophy. Methodological individualism can be opposed to, for example, ‘moral individualism’ in that the latter refers to the ethical basis of action in modern society (according to Durkheim, see Chapter 5). By contrast, methodological individualism is the investigative principle that all human action can be explained by reference to individual actions. This opposes the idea that the explanatory level exists at the ‘supra-individual’ level, such as Durkheim’s society, Simmel’s types of groups or associations (for example, dyads, triads) or Marx’s ‘collective subjects’ (social classes). Although this idea appears to be strictly analytical, it carries with it assumptions about the nature of social life and human nature by asserting that the supra-individual level is ultimately reducible to individuals.

Finally, it should be noted that this subject guide builds on previous knowledge and understanding that you will have gained in studying 21 Principles of sociology if you are studying this course as part of a BSc degree.
## Examination structure

**Important:** the information and advice given here are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this we strongly advise you to always check both the current Regulations for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

The examination paper for this course is three hours in duration and you are expected to answer **FOUR** questions, from a choice of **TWELVE**. The paper is divided into sections in exactly the same way as the subject guide (Section A ‘Classical Sociologists’, Section B ‘Twentieth Century Developments’ and Section C ‘New Directions’). You must answer **ONE** question from **EACH** section and then one question from any section.

The Examiners attempt to ensure that all of the topics covered in the syllabus and subject guide are examined. Some questions could cover more than one topic from the syllabus since the different topics are not self-contained. A Sample examination paper appears in Appendix 2.

You should ensure that all four questions are answered, allowing an approximately equal amount of time for each question, and attempting all parts or aspects of a question.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners' commentaries for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered

## Examination advice

In approaching this examination, the most important thing to remember is that even if you know and fully understand the material, if you cannot clearly convey this to the Examiners you will not achieve a high mark. Remember that you must give yourself a sufficient amount of time to answer each question. The material in the subject guide, on its own, is not sufficient to pass the examination. You must be able to demonstrate familiarity with the arguments, ideas and debates to be found in the Essential reading. Excellent answers will also make use of Further recommended reading. The best examination answers are those that contain plenty of references to a wide range of relevant reading and which engage in critical discussion of this material in the context of the question that is asked.
Chapter 2: What is ‘sociological theory’?

Aims of the chapter

The aims of this chapter are to:

• introduce you to some of the key aspects of sociological theory
• provide you with a detailed account of how theory works to produce knowledge of the social world
• outline the ways that sociological knowledge is dependent on theory in the production of key concepts and ideas
• explain how we can critically analyse different theories.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• discuss different aspects of theoretical knowledge
• explain what different theories do
• compare, contrast, evaluate and analyse different theoretical models and recognising the ways in which theorists use concepts.

Essential reading


Further reading


Introduction

We begin this course with a chapter that asks an important, but often overlooked question: what is sociological theory? We are not, at this stage, asking what sorts of sociological theories there are or comprehensively describing what their content is, but what theory itself is and how theory works. From these basic questions, we will go on to examine the crucial importance of theory to sociology as a discipline and, importantly, we will ask how the theories that sociologists have developed relate to the work that they do in describing, defining and explaining the social and cultural worlds that we live in. We will use some specific examples from aspects of the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, three of the so-called ‘founding fathers’ of sociology. At this stage you do not need to focus on the actual content of their theory; instead you should think about how
they theorised the social world.

The chapter is structured around four key questions:

• What is a ‘theory’?
• Why do sociologists need theories?
• Why are there so many different and competing sociological theories?
• How can we make sense of such theories?

In exploring these questions, this chapter aims to ‘de-mystify’ theory and to show how the continuous development and revision of theories is vitally important to any serious academic discipline. Sociological theory is not something that is incidental to the work that sociologists do; it is central to that work. Once we are able to appreciate its fundamental importance, we should also be able to recognise that sociological theory is not as ‘abstract’ as it may at first look and that it is intimately linked to the sort of questions that we all begin to ask about the social world, once we begin to study it seriously. We will also begin to appreciate that the in-depth study of sociological theory is an intellectually stimulating and rewarding endeavour.

What is theory?

Sociology as a discipline emerged out of a series of debates begun during the period of the Enlightenment1 between philosophers, scientists and other intellectuals about the origins and nature of human societies (Skidmore, 1979: 1). The important thing for us to grasp here is that sociological thinking emerged out of a series of debates. Questions began to be asked during the period of the Enlightenment about what societies are and how they function; about the relationship between individuals and societies, and about social change. However, these questions did not immediately lead to a single set of conclusions. Rather, different perspectives and different ideas emerged in response to these questions and these were often vigorously debated between people holding competing views.

This remains the case today and it is important to grasp this point as it allows us to recognise that the systematic attempt to answer complex questions is bound to lead to different solutions, in other words to different theories of what societies are and how they work.

Sociological theory is closely related to other forms of social theory. As we will see, sociology as an academic discipline emerged in the later part of the nineteenth century. From the beginning, it attempted to define itself against other forms of explanation, including other types of social theory. However, as we will see throughout this course, sociological theory has been and continues to be influenced by the numerous strands of thought in other social and human sciences. It responds, as it always has done, to profound, ongoing transformation in the social, political and economic arrangements of the world.

Activity

Now read the introduction and the first page of Chapter 1 (p.10) of Callinicos and the General Introduction in Calhoun.

After you have read these texts, answer the following questions:

• According to Callinicos, what are the three identifying features of social theory? (See p.10.) Jot these down and provide some explanation for each of these features.
Chapter 2: What is ‘sociological theory’?

- According to Calhoun et al. in their introduction to *Classical Sociological Theory*, what role did the rise of science play in the development of sociological theory?
- Callinicos argues that: ‘attempts to counterpose the classics and the contemporary create a false dilemma. Social theory is indispensable to engaging with the present.’ What do you think he means by this? You should draw on ideas in both Callinicos and Calhoun when writing down ideas in answer to this question.

### Theory in the natural sciences

So, what is a ‘theory’? We have already provided something of an answer to this question when it was stated that: the asking of fundamental questions about the nature of the social world led different thinkers to attempt to find systematic answers. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the discoveries of natural scientists about the properties of the physical and the biological realms had revolutionised the way that people understood the world around them. Like natural scientists, the early social scientists set about developing theories through which they could describe the phenomena they encountered and understand the processes that gave rise to these phenomena.

The natural sciences were held in such high regard during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it was thought that they could provide explicit methodological models for the social sciences. The adoption of a ‘scientific’ approach implied that society was something that was in effect unknowable in ordinary or ‘commonsense’ terms and that specialist methods were required in order to understand what it was and how it worked. The development of theoretical models of what societies are and how they function is central to the production of sociological as opposed to commonsense understandings of the social world.

Now, by ‘theory’ the (natural and social) scientist does not mean (as in everyday usage) vague guesses or imprecise conjectures (as in ‘well, my theory would be…’). For scientists, a theory usually emerges out of a long period of careful observation of phenomena and represents a serious attempt at a systematic and logically consistent framework of explanation based on the accumulation of empirical evidence. A theory, or a theoretical model, is a series of propositions about the possible nature of an object or phenomenon. We use the word possible because a theory is not a final statement of truth but a series of plausible conjectures, based on available evidence, which appears to most accurately describe that phenomenon, account for how it functions and how it relates to other phenomena. Theory is important because it makes generalisations about observations and consists of an interrelated, coherent set of ideas and models.

Typically, theories are both descriptive and explanatory. That is, a theory should have the capacity to describe a set of observed phenomena and to explain their occurrence, usually causally.

### Activity


The book is an account of Bangladeshi immigration into Tower Hamlets, a district in London’s East End, and the response of the white working-class population to this.
Extract A
One way of understanding the overall process of Bangladeshi settlement in the East End of London, and local reactions to it, is to look at it in the context of Britain’s imperial past. Until the Second World War all classes within the metropolitan nation profited together from empire, whether they were aware of it or not. Although East Enders were at the bottom of British society, they were still better off than people in dependent colonies. This gave them a stake in the system and, in some cases, a sense of superiority, which helped make them loyal British citizens. (p.205)

Extract B
In 1991…Bangladeshis constituted nearly a quarter of the overall Tower Hamlets population, and a decade later had become marginally more than a third. Behind these figures, however, lies a great deal of conflict. The state authorities had accepted the right of immigrant families to be here, and did their best to protect them as citizens, but many old East Enders resented their presence. (p.60)

• Which of these extracts is a description and which an explanation?
• What is the relationship between the description and the explanation?
• What sort of specialist knowledge about the white working-class community do we need to have if we are to understand their response to the Bangladeshi immigrants?
• Is the explanation proposed the only possible explanation for this response?

In our usual understanding of science, a theory continues to be worked on and tested and is thus always open-ended and provisional rather than dogmatically held to represent the ‘truth’. So theory for the scientist is always work in progress and the scientist may well end up having to revise their ideas if sufficient evidence emerges that contradicts an existing theory.

A classic example of empirical evidence leading to the collapse of an established theory is the abandonment in the seventeenth century of the ‘geocentric’ model of the universe. According to this theory, the earth was the centre of the universe and the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars revolved around it. This ‘Ptolemaic’ theory of the cosmos was prevalent for many hundreds of years. It was not until the early seventeenth century with the development of telescopic lenses that observation of planetary movements (in particular Galileo’s observation of the 1610 transit of Venus) led to the abandonment of the theory and its replacement with a new theory of the solar system with the sun, rather than the Earth, at its centre.

Theory and ‘commonsense’
There is another important point here too. The ‘Ptolemaic’ or ‘geocentric’ theory of the cosmos and the place of the earth in it appeared to correspond to the immediate evidence of the senses. It was only when a different kind of evidence was presented (careful observation of planetary motion using a telescope) that what had previously appeared as a commonsense ‘truth’ was shown to be false. For the sociologist, commonsense understanding is typically problematic. As members of the social world we all have an immediate, everyday and commonsense understanding of, for example, the family and our place within it, or of our experience of the education system, or of the culture of our respective societies and so forth. However, such commonsense understanding is not a sociological theory of the society that we live in. Instead, sociological theory, like theory in the natural sciences, proposes a much broader...
framework that attempts to both describe and explain specific phenomena (such as ‘the family’).

Sociological theory emerged out of questions and debates about the nature of human societies that began to be asked seriously from the eighteenth century onwards. One of the important outcomes of this was the development of sociology as an academic discipline. In the first instance, this meant that approaches to the serious study of society were influenced by and largely derived from the methodologies of the natural sciences. Out of this process, many different sociological traditions emerged and developed. They offered often radically different approaches, ideas and conclusions. However, one thing that most of them had in common was the commitment to the development of explanatory frameworks within which specific social phenomena (for example, social class, suicide and so forth) could be understood as part of much larger social, cultural or economic processes. It is through the development of such frameworks that sociologists are able to account for the phenomena that they study. It is also through these frameworks that sociologists can challenge the commonsense and often very limited accounts of the social world that most of us have. Thus, when we read sociological theory we can expect to find aspects of the social world with which we thought we were familiar placed in different and sometimes surprising contexts, often giving us radically different and new perspectives on them.

Activities

Read the following extract from Marx’s ‘Preface’ to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859).

‘In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.’

(A complete version of this text can be found at: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm)

Marx is discussing the major transformations (and inevitable conflicts) that occur throughout society as a result of changes in the economy. Marx makes a clear distinction between what we can know about material changes to the economy and how these changes are experienced by members of society.

• Which of these processes is easier to understand and why?

• What do you think Marx means when he states that: ‘Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness’?

• If we cannot rely on accounts that individuals who participate in processes of change can give to us about what is happening, how do we know what is really occurring?

• According to Marx, where can we find the real explanation for social conflict?
What is sociological theory?

Sociological theory emerges out of attempts to provide explanatory frameworks that link specific aspects of the social world to larger processes, thus helping us to contextualise them and to understand them. William Skidmore (1979: 4) suggests that most sociological theories are developed out of a desire to find solutions to ‘theoretical problems’. For Skidmore, ‘theoretical problems’ are questions about how we might understand problematic aspects of the social world. For example, how do we explain social disintegration or the maintenance of social stability; the persistence of poverty, the rise and fall of the suicide rate or the birth rate, for example? Skidmore argues that the ‘solutions’ to these problems usually involve the creation of ‘additional related concepts’ through which the first problem can be understood.

Let us take as an example Durkheim’s solution to the ‘problem’ of the fluctuation of the suicide rate. Durkheim found that in Europe the suicide rate in predominantly Protestant areas was significantly higher than that in Catholic ones. Durkheim’s solution to this ‘problem’ was to generate additional concepts (such as ‘anomie’, or the feeling of being without a social ‘role’). These new concepts were related by Durkheim to the key notion of social solidarity and its relationship to human well-being. So while Durkheim’s interest in suicide began as a theoretical problem centred on a question (‘how do we account for the relatively higher rates of suicide in the suicide rate?’), its solution involved the construction of a theory of society that stressed the importance of solidarity and integration. When various factors cause solidarity and meaningful integration to break down, increased rates of suicide follow as a consequence. Durkheim’s theory also states that it is these social rather than more individual psychological factors that determine changes in the suicide rate. As we can see, the original question is answered when Durkheim relates the phenomenon of suicide to a number of causal factors which, when taken together, provide an overall theory of the way that society works and which stresses the danger posed by possible forms of social breakdown. The theory is also directly ‘counter-intuitive’ in that it turns on its head our commonsense understanding of suicide (we tend to think of it as a purely personal, individual act).

Theory and ‘proof’: testing a hypothesis

Another key point to note here is how Durkheim’s general theory of the primacy of society over the individual generates a concrete hypothesis in relation to the problem of suicide. A hypothesis is a testable statement, which sometimes takes the form of a prediction, about a relationship between two or more ideas or classes of phenomena. In Durkheim’s case, we can see that the purpose of his study of suicide is to demonstrate a relationship between social solidarity and individual behaviour. We have already seen how in the natural sciences, theory is often (although not always) developed through empirical observation and study, experimentation and so on through a process of generalisation from particular examples. This process is known as induction. When we come to think about hypotheses we can see this process in reverse; this is called deduction. Here, reasoning is from the general to the particular. That is, from a general statement or rule we move to down to a specific example. The specific example is then demonstrated to be an example of the workings of the general rule. The two are thus directly related to one another.
For example, Durkheim’s general theory, developed over a number of studies, maintains that the individual is entirely dependent on society for all aspects of life. The collective entity that we refer to as ‘society’ gives us our identity and a sense of belonging. If the social bonds are sufficiently robust, social solidarity will be relatively highly developed and the individual will be integrated into the social order. In order for Durkheim to demonstrate this general theoretical proposition, he needed to prove a definite relationship between social solidarity and individual behaviour. In order to do this, Durkheim needed ‘concrete indications’ of both social solidarity and individual behaviour. Durkheim had collected statistical data about an apparently supremely individual act (suicide). He also noted that stronger forms of social solidarity were provided by the Catholic faith and weaker ones by the Protestant, which is a much more individualistic religious tradition.

Durkheim’s hypothesis therefore was ‘that in areas of Europe where Catholicism was strong, suicide rates would be lower than in areas where Protestantism was predominant’ (Skidmore: 8). Durkheim expected a relationship to exist between suicide rates and religious affiliation precisely because he had derived his hypothesis from a general theoretical understanding of the relationship between social solidarity and individuality. As Skidmore argues, ‘[t]he fact that Durkheim’s concrete prediction (his hypothesis) was by and large confirmed suggested that the theoretical scheme from which it derived also was valid’. The apparent fact that suicide rates are higher in Protestant countries appeared to provide empirical evidence proving the validity of the general theory. In this case, therefore, we can see that a very important aspect of theoretical work is that it makes general propositions about the nature of the social world that we inhabit and it also attempts to validate these propositions through use of specific, empirically verifiable examples. The testing of hypotheses is one part of this process.

Activities

What is a hypothesis? Write down in your own words what you understand by this term. Can you think of a practical example of your own?

Explaining the bigger picture

We have seen how theories tend to make strong general propositions. We have also seen how theorists develop hypotheses that test the validity of these propositions by attempting to demonstrate significant (possibly causal) relationships between particular aspects of the social world. Many sociological theories are however highly complex in character and they suggest that in order for us to understand a specific phenomenon, a complex set of related concepts are required. Skidmore (1979:3) argues that one of the characteristics of sociological theories is that they ‘generate additional ideas in the course of solving a theoretical problem.’ These ideas might involve creating new concepts. As we have seen in looking at the example of Durkheim, a theoretical problem or question is usually only answered once it can be located in a coherent (theoretical) framework within which it can be explained as part of a larger process. Skidmore uses the example of social class to demonstrate how this works.

According to Skidmore, social class is a ‘single concept’ and while it might be ‘felt or experienced’ at an individual level it cannot be explained or understood without additional concepts and ideas. Skidmore states that:

\[\text{We say ‘appeared’ here because of course Durkheim’s evidence was statistical data with which there were all kinds of potential problems about reliability, etc.}\]
Only when the concept of social class is put together with additional ideas does it begin to be explained and accounted for. Understanding social class has altogether to do with the meaning of social structure, social relations, power, privilege, obligation, authority, and many other ideas. In practical terms, this suggests that to understand social class, one is obliged to develop clear ideas of these related factors. (3)

The important point that Skidmore makes here is that of the relationship between a single concept and additional ideas. In order for the concept of social class to be made meaningful it has to be related to other ideas that can explain it and its importance.

**Conclusion**

This introduction has shown you how sociological theory is a central element of the work of sociology as an academic discipline. We looked at the critical differences between sociological theory and one’s commonsense views, opinions and prejudices. In other words, we made a distinction between the formal nature of sociological theorising and its claims to objectivity and one’s subjective view of the world. We also saw how sociological theory emerges from a system of thinking that links concepts, often new concepts, with evidence or data to create a broader understanding and explanation of the social world. We saw how concept formation is essential to sociological theorising.

**A reminder of your learning outcomes**

Having studied this chapter and completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- discuss different aspects of theoretical knowledge
- explain what different theories do
- compare, contrast, evaluate and analyse critical skills in analysing different theoretical models and recognising the ways in which they use concepts.

**Sample examination questions**

1. Why is theory necessary for sociology?
2. What is the difference between description and explanation?
Chapter 3: The Enlightenment and the emergence of social theory

Aims of the chapter

This chapter aims to introduce you to Enlightenment thought and to demonstrate its role in the development of sociological theory.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• describe the main intellectual currents of the Enlightenment
• outline and assess the contribution of the ideas of key Enlightenment thinkers
• explain the importance of science in Enlightenment thought
• compare and contrast the similarities and differences between Enlightenment thought and subsequent forms of social scientific thought.

Essential reading

Calhoun, C. et al. (eds) Classical Sociological Theory. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 'Introduction to Part I' (pp.19–38). We will also be reading extracts in Calhoun from:
Adam Smith's ‘The wealth of Nations’ (pp.44–52) and Immanuel Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (pp.39–43).

Further reading

Introduction

Along with related ‘social sciences’, sociology emerged as a separate academic discipline in the nineteenth century. However, sociological thought (the capacity to reflect upon and to think critically about a specifically ‘social’ dimension to human affairs) has its roots in much earlier periods. In this chapter, we look specifically at the highly influential thought of the European Enlightenment and at its development into the early nineteenth century.

New ways of thinking about societies began to emerge during the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. A new, critical approach to intellectual inquiry developed which provided the foundations for the development of specifically social scientific approaches to the understanding of social processes. In this chapter, we look at some of the key ideas and intellectual developments that occurred during this period.

What was the Enlightenment?

The Enlightenment refers to a period of European intellectual history that has its beginnings in the early years of the eighteenth century. Many of the most important thinkers, movements and projects associated with the Enlightenment were based in France. However, Enlightenment thinkers were also active in most of the major European states of the day including, importantly, in Scotland.

During this period a new framework of ideas about human beings and their societies was developed in the work of a wide variety of thinkers. In particular, a new preoccupation with the social world emerged. This began to be seen as a specific and important realm of human activity. This focus on the social world generated new questions about human history, political and economic activity, and forms of social interaction. This questioning of the social world was based in a new spirit of inquiry that no longer looked to tradition, to ‘classical’ authors or to religious texts for certain knowledge. Instead, rational methods of inquiry sought to explain how and why the specific conditions of the present had arisen and, importantly, what might be done to change these conditions for the better.

Enlightenment thinking took place within a broad paradigm in which certain basic tenets were accepted. A paradigm is a set of interconnected ideas, values, principles and facts within which coherent theories (attempts to describe and to explain phenomena) are developed. Hamilton (1992) pp.21–22, argues that key aspects of the Enlightenment paradigm included:

- **Reason**: the fundamental importance of reason and rationality as ways of organising knowledge were stressed.
- **Empiricism**: this is the idea that all thought and knowledge about the natural and social worlds is based on what we can apprehend through our senses. Much Enlightenment thought relied upon using both rational and empirical methods.
- **Science**: this is the idea that the only way to expand human knowledge is through those methods (experimental, etc.) devised during the ‘scientific revolution’ of the seventeenth century.
- **Universalism**: the idea that reason and science are applicable in all circumstances and that they can provide explanations for all phenomena in all circumstances. Science in particular was thought to uncover universal laws.
Chapter 3: The Enlightenment and the emergence of social theory

• **Progress**: this is a key idea of the Enlightenment. Here, it was believed that human beings could improve their natural and social conditions through the application of reason and of science. The result would be an ever-increasing level of happiness and well-being.

• **Individualism**: the idea that the individual is paramount and that his or her individual reason cannot be subject to a higher (possibly irrational) authority (such as the Church) or traditional knowledge.

• **Toleration**: the idea that all human beings are essentially the same and that the beliefs of other cultures or ‘races’ are not necessarily inferior to those of European Christianity.

• **Freedom**: opposition to the traditional constraints on belief, expression, trade, social interaction and so forth.

• **Secularism**: another key aspect of Enlightenment thought, this is opposition to traditional religious knowledge and to metaphysical speculation.

• **Anti-clericalism**: opposition to the Church, organised religion, superstition and religious persecution.

• **Enthusiasm for technological and medical progress**: an enormous enthusiasm for scientific discovery and its practical application in the fields of technology and medicine.

• **A desire for political change and reform**: Enlightenment thinkers were not democrats, but they wished to see constitutional and legal reforms in the states in which they lived.

• **A belief in the pre-eminence of empirical, materialist knowledge**: a desire to uncover the real reasons for the ways that societies operate; the model used was derived from the natural sciences.

The Enlightenment was largely the ‘work of three overlapping and closely linked generations’ of thinkers (Hamilton, 1992:25). The first of these included the French thinkers Voltaire (1694–1778) and Montesquieu (1689–1755) and was strongly influenced by the work of the English political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727). For this generation of thinkers, rational inquiry based on the natural sciences and a critique of the social and political institutions of ‘absolutist’ monarchy was important. The second generation included the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) and French philosophers Rousseau (1712–78) and Diderot (1713–84). It was more explicitly ‘anti-clerical’ and continued and developed the interest in the application of scientific method to ‘moral’ (or social) issues developed by members of the first generation. The third generation included the German philosopher Kant (1724–1804) and Scottish moral philosophers Adam Smith (1723–90) and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816).

From this point Enlightenment thinking ceased to be quite so general and a series of more specialised ‘proto-disciplines’ began to emerge: these included epistemology, economics, sociology and political economy. Although Enlightenment thought was not in any precise sense consistent, it is usual to refer to the entire period as the ‘Age of Enlightenment’. This clearly carries the connotation that it was a period that saw itself as emerging into the light from a ‘dark age’ of superstition and ignorance.
Activity

Now read sections 1.1 and 1.2 (pp.10-15) of Callinicos' book Social Theory and answer the questions below. You should read these sections of the chapter carefully and answer the questions by jotting down notes as you read and then writing out your answers more fully after you have read the text again. Quite a lot of the activities in this guide are based on close readings of texts (either sections of chapters from Callinicos or extracts from key authors in Calhoun). The best way to approach these activities is to read the text through once to get a sense of it. You should then read the text again to make sure that you have understood it properly – the questions are here to help you to understand key arguments in the text.

- According to Callinicos, in what ways is social theory a ‘historically novel phenomenon’?
- What was the ‘cyclical view of history’?
- What was the significance of the Enlightenment’s break with the assumption that ‘classical’ authors ‘had already identified the limited range of social forms’?
- What was different about the Enlightenment’s ideas about ‘historical time’?
- According to Callinicos, what were the developments in the eighteenth century that encouraged a view of ‘progress’?

As we have seen from our reading, there had been speculation about human beings and their social, political and historical circumstances. However, it was also the case that such speculation tended to assume that societies and civilisations passed through (inevitable) cyclical stages of growth and decline and that nothing essentially new was ever likely to appear. By the eighteenth century, however, many educated Europeans began to sense that the societies they lived in were undergoing unprecedented changes.

The development of social theory

It was during the eighteenth century that a number of different thinkers began to investigate the social world more systematically. Social, cultural and political arrangements began to be thought of as the result of complex processes that were not immediately obvious from casual observation. Neither could they be explained through the study of what ancient authors had to say. This was partly as a consequence of the profound changes that were at work in the European societies of the eighteenth century. The sociologist Karl Polanyi described these changes as ‘the great transformation’ and argued that they were part of a fundamental transformation of social, economic and political life which gave birth to the ‘modern’ world. Polanyi argued that this transformation was well underway by the middle of the eighteenth century. The period of the Enlightenment can therefore be seen as one of transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ forms of society. The new preoccupation with developing forms of explanation (‘theories’) for how and why societies work in the ways that they do can be seen as a response to these unprecedented changes.

Awareness of these changes led to a desire to understand and to account for them. We have already seen that older forms of explanation began to be considered inadequate to this task. One of the consequences of this was that the study of societies and their development became more closely related to the scientific study of the natural world and to draw on similar methodologies. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century had, in the work of Isaac Newton, for example, revolutionised
the understanding of the natural world and science was held in very high esteem. It is unsurprising therefore that the methods that natural scientists had developed should be put to use to explore aspects of the social world. The natural sciences were thought to provide a model for disinterested inquiry. They pointed to the possibility of a rational and empirically-based method for creating a form of knowledge that was not conditioned by religious dogma or tradition (Hamilton, 1992: 43).

The use of methods and ideas derived from the natural sciences is extremely important but it also raises problems that continue within social scientific work. As we have seen, the Enlightenment was to a large extent based on humanitarian principles and a desire to change and to improve social institutions. Social institutions were felt to have been dominated by attitudes based on religious dogma and unthinking forms of tradition. Change and improvement were to be achieved firstly by applying critical and rational methods of inquiry to these institutions, thereby exposing their foundational basis in oppressive or irrational modes of thought.

This is an important point as it opens up a very interesting problem. The use of methods of inquiry based on the natural sciences was intended to produce objective forms of knowledge. However, the Enlightenment itself was based in a moral imperative to improve society. In other words this moral dimension of Enlightenment thought was rooted in a particular set of values. In this sense, the Enlightenment can be seen as a normative project. Scientific inquiry on the other hand regarded itself as a disinterested and value-free pursuit that was interested solely in the discovery of facts in the form of objective ‘laws’. One of the blind spots of Enlightenment thought was its inability to recognise that the type of scientific inquiry that it espoused was incapable of providing an objective basis for its moral and ethical values.

Activity

One of the key thinkers of the earlier part of the Enlightenment period was Voltaire (1694–1778). Voltaire argued against the power of the Church and against superstition in general. On 1 November 1755 a powerful earthquake destroyed the Portuguese city of Lisbon. It was one of the most destructive earthquakes in history, killing between 60,000 and 100,000 people. The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fire. Lisbon was the capital of a devout Christian country. The catastrophe struck on a Catholic holiday at a time when the churches were full. Most of the churches collapsed on top of their congregations killing thousands of people. As a consequence Voltaire was inspired to write his novel Candide in which he explored the implications of the earthquake for ideas about divine providence. It seemed especially ironic that the good had perished (in the churches) while the ‘wicked’ had been spared. This certainly seemed to challenge ideas that natural disasters (such as earthquakes) could have a divine cause (usually as a punishment).

Now read the following newspaper report about floods in the UK during the summer of 2007: ‘Floods are judgement on society, say bishops’ available on: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1556131/Floods-are-judgement-on-society-say-bishops.html

The floods mostly affected people living in the countryside, far away from the metropolitan areas where the ‘immoral’ behaviours described by the Bishop occur.

How might thinkers of the Enlightenment period have responded to the comments of the Bishop?

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1 In philosophy and social science, normative is usually contrasted with positive (i.e. descriptive) or explanatory when describing types of theories, beliefs, or propositions. Descriptive statements attempt to describe reality (in as ‘neutral’ and objective a manner as possible). Normative statements, on the other hand, affirm how things should or ought to be, how to value them, which things are good or bad, which actions are right or wrong.
The emergent social sciences (they were called 'moral sciences' during this period) that developed across the eighteenth century in the work of Enlightenment thinkers needed two basic conditions in order to develop coherent areas of study. Both of these conditions were derived from the natural sciences. The first precondition is naturalism, which is the notion that cause and effect sequences fully explain social phenomena (as opposed to metaphysical or spiritual influences). Secondly, the control of prejudice was felt to be necessary if inquiry was to be value-free.

Activity

Now read section 1.3 of Callinicos (pp.15–20).

Starting from the beginning of the text, answer the following questions:

• What are the two decisive features that Enlightenment thinkers have in common?
• What did Enlightenment thinkers mean by 'morals'?
• Describe how scientific ideas were used by Enlightenment thinkers to explain 'morals'. (Write about 150 words.)

Now read through to the end of the section and then, in Calhoun's Classical Sociological Theory turn to Chapter 3 beginning on p.44. You will find an extract from Adam Smith's book The Wealth of Nations. Read the extract to p.52.

Smith's work is often thought of as marking the birth of the new science of economics. However Smith thought of himself as a moral philosopher. Remember, we have seen that the term 'moral' was used in a rather different sense to the way that it is used today. In the eighteenth century, the study of 'morals' included the 'passions' or emotions (which were seen as a driving force behind forms of human sociality) and social institutions.

Once you have read the extract from The Wealth of Nations answer the following question:

• What does Smith mean by the 'division of labour'?
• According to Smith what have been the advantages of the division of labour for European societies?

Smith states that 'the division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual, consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another.'

• Write down in your own words what Smith means by this. Use examples from the text to illustrate your answer. (Write about 350 words.)

Callinicos argues that there are two theoretical breakthroughs in the analysis of society contained in The Wealth of Nations. In the first of these, Callinicos argues, he 'turns the principle of unintended consequences into an analytical tool' (p.17).

• What does he mean by this?
• What is the second theoretical breakthrough contained in The Wealth of Nations?
• What does Callinicos mean by 'social objectivity'? (p.18).

Enlightenment and the question of 'society'?

As we have seen, Enlightenment thinkers initially tended to make use of scientific method in an attempt to uncover the basis of social life in an underlying and unchanging 'human nature'. So, although the Enlightenment represented a considerable break with earlier forms of inquiry, it continued to assume that social formations and processes were essentially derived from 'human nature'.
This idea was present, for example, in the work of the seventeenth century English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704). Both wrote extensively about social and political issues from a secular and an historical perspective. That is, they conceived of human affairs (human social and political arrangements) strictly in their own terms in much the same ways that later Enlightenment thinkers would. Both saw them as produced by human beings and as having definite historical conditions and as such they were thought to be susceptible to positive change. In other words, these positive changes would follow from human beings reflecting critically on their societies and the ways that they functioned.

Both Hobbes and Locke based their ideas on the notion that social and political arrangements are determined by a fixed and unchanging human nature. They both argued that in an original, pre-social ‘state of nature’, human beings would have had specific characteristics. Famously, Hobbes deduced that in a ‘state of nature’ human beings would be war-like and violent (as a direct and inescapable consequence of their ‘nature’). According to Hobbes, this unchanging nature means that if left to themselves, human beings will always revert to violence in order to get what they want and that the social order will be threatened with collapse. As a consequence of this, Hobbes advocated the imposition of a strong state. We can see therefore that Hobbes’ theory about human beings and their societies is based on the idea that it is human ‘nature’ that determines the way that societies operate.

This view of human beings was challenged during the (generally much more optimistic) period of Enlightenment by one its major thinkers, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). In the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Rousseau argued that the ‘state of nature’ as imagined by Hobbes was in fact based on faulty reasoning. Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’, Rousseau argued, was based on the values and tendencies evident in human beings living in contemporary societies. Rousseau saw the greed and violence of mankind as being the products of society rather than ‘nature’. Writing of Hobbes and other thinkers who had attempted to describe the ‘state of nature’ Rousseau argued that:

> Every one of them, in short, constantly dwelling on wants, avidity, oppression, desires and pride, has transferred to the state of nature ideas which were acquired in society; so that, in speaking of the savage, they described the social man. (Rousseau, 1999:9)

This is an important point, as it highlights one of the recurring themes within Enlightenment thought about the relationship between ‘nature’, ‘human nature’ and the social world. In The Discourse, Rousseau engaged in a ‘thought experiment’ of his own and attempted to deduce what human beings in a ‘natural’ state might have been like. However, he was aware of the great difficulty of attempting to discover what a ‘natural’ (that is a pre-social state might look like):

> The investigations we may enter into, in treating this subject, must not be considered as historical truths, but only as mere conditional and hypothetical reasonings…For it is by no means a light undertaking to distinguish properly between what is original and what is artificial in the actual nature of man, or to form a true idea of a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist…(Rousseau, 1999:10)
In other words, Rousseau claims that it is enormously difficult to decide what is social ('artificial') and what is natural ('original') in human beings. We have seen that Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* argues that the self-interested economic transactions of individuals are responsible for the creation of a large-scale self-regulating market economy. Smith argues that this emerges as an *unintended consequence* of the activities of human beings engaged in trade with one another. The interactions of people in their daily activities of trading and exchanging goods have consequences which go far beyond the level of the individuals involved. Thus, Smith’s analysis of the commercial society of the eighteenth century proposes that it has emerged as a consequence of activities that, taken together, make up something that is more than the sum of these individual parts.

However, as Callinicos argues, Smith’s analysis (and the similar analyses of some other Enlightenment thinkers) accorded a ‘privileged status’ to human nature. Remember, Smith argued that human beings have a ‘natural’ disposition to trade and the widespread division of labour and the development of commercial society are an ‘unintended consequence’ of this. Rather like Hobbes, therefore, Smith has attempted to ‘base concrete accounts of social institutions and behaviour on generalisations about human nature’ (19).

**Activity**

Now read sections 1.4 (pp.20–24) of Callinicos.

We have seen how Smith explains the development of the new commercial societies of the eighteenth century as an ‘unintended consequence’ of forms of social interaction. Two slightly earlier thinkers had also attempted to provide positive explanations for different types of social and political formation: Vico (1668–1774) and Montesquieu (1689–1755). Their *New Science* (1725) and *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) respectively were attempts to explain how different social and political conditions were subject to specific cultural and material determination. In other words, complex historical (and even environmental) factors were taken into account when describing specific societies and how they operated. Read section 1.4 carefully and answer the following questions:

- What role does climate pay in helping to determine the ‘spirit of the laws’ for Montesquieu?
- Outline John Millar’s ‘Four Stages Theory’ of historical development.
- In what way does it represent an advance on Montesquieu’s account of the influence of climate on political institutions?
- Look back at p. 10 to where Callinicos defines ‘modern social theory’. Why does Callinicos argue that ‘it is in the writings of the Scottish philosophes that we see modern social theory first emerge’?

**Rationalist optimism**

We have seen that in the work of several important Enlightenment thinkers ideas about the relationship between political, economic and social arrangements began to be thought of in significantly new ways. Generally, the Enlightenment period is thought of as one of ‘rationalist optimism’ in which it was assumed that ‘progress’ would follow from the discovery of new or more rational ways of organising societies.

This optimism was based on the assumption that progress was genuinely possible through the use of *reason*. A classic statement of this was to be found in Kant’s text: ‘What is Enlightenment?’ and it is worth looking at this in detail to see how Enlightenment thinkers envisaged the use of reason benefiting ‘humanity’ in general.
Activity

Now read Chapter 2: ‘What is Enlightenment’? by Immanuel Kant (pp.39–43) in Calhoun.

Kant (1724–1804) was one of the most influential philosophers of the modern period. He wrote ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in response to a question posed a year earlier by the Reverend Johann Friedrich Zöllner (who was also an official in the Prussian government). Zöllner’s question was addressed to a broad intellectual public. Kant’s response was published in the December 1784 publication of the Berlinische Monatsschrift (Berlin Monthly). A number of leading intellectuals replied to Zöllner’s question with essays, of which Kant’s is the most famous.

Read the text carefully. Use the following questions as a guide to help you think through some of the key arguments and ideas in the text.

• What does Kant mean by self-imposed immaturity?
• What are the causes of this ‘self-imposed immaturity’?
• On p.40, Kant argues that ‘all that is required for this enlightenment is freedom; and particularly…the freedom of man to make public use of his reason in all matters.’ What does Kant mean by this? What does he mean by the public use of reason? What is the difference between public use of reason and private use of reason? (See pp.40–41.)
• Under what circumstances is it permitted to debate or to argue with authority and under which circumstances is it not?
• Do you think that this is fair?
• Kant argues (p.41) that ‘should a society of clergymen...be entitled to commit itself by oath to a certain unalterable doctrine in order to perpetuate an endless guardianship over each of its members and through them over the people? I answer that this is quite inconceivable.’ What does Kant mean by this? In what way would this keep ‘humanity forever from further enlightenment’?
• Why is it important to allow citizens complete freedom of conscience in choosing which religion they believe in?
• Why does Kant believe that freedom is so important?

By the end of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution, which began in 1789 and was initially greeted with much optimism, had proved a powerfully disillusioning experience for thinkers who wished to see ‘progress’ and enlightened reform of existing social institutions. At first, the Revolution was seen as ‘an opportunity for enlightened men to bring about a more rational, just and humane organisation of the affairs of mankind’ (Hamilton, 1992:49). It appeared that many of the ideas that enlightened thinkers had discussed throughout the century were being realised as rights and liberties (freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc.) and were enshrined in a new constitution. However, after 1792 the first phase of revolutionary government in France passed well beyond the stage of enlightened reform and culminated in the period of the Terror in 1793–4. The king and large numbers of the aristocracy were executed along with anyone considered to be an enemy of the Revolution, including many who had been its strong and active supporters. Following the Terror a new form of ‘absolutism’ was established as Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor. Enlightened reforms were suspended.

The course of events in the Revolution, from hopeful reform through the period of the Terror to the establishment of a new form of absolutism under Napoleon also marked the end of the Enlightenment ‘as a force for progress and intellectual change’ (Hamilton, 1992:51). However, although
some of its ideas about progress and its faith in reason had been shattered by events, the new ways of thinking about human beings and their societies were not abandoned. Indeed, the emergence of new forms of government, a powerful new class of capitalist entrepreneurs, the arrival of the industrial revolution and the rapid growth of cities and towns, demanded new social theories that could account for and explain the direction in which ‘modern’ societies were heading.

Activity
Now read section 1.5 of Callinicos.

Callinicos argues that the Enlightenment was never ‘blindly optimistic’. He identifies five major sources of tension in Enlightenment thought.

- In your own words, write down what these five areas of tension were.
- What were the main characteristics of each of these areas of tension?

Comte and sociological positivism

Activity
Now read Callinicos Chapter 3 pp.65–66.

We need to look briefly at one influential thinker in the period following the end of Enlightenment. August Comte (1798–1857) criticised what he called the ‘negative’ philosophy developed by eighteenth century individualistic philosophers such as Kant. In his view, they had destroyed rather than provided the foundations for social order and social consensus. Comte was the first person to use the term ‘sociology’. His aim was to create a ‘naturalistic science of society capable of both explaining the past and predicting the future’ (Hamilton, 1992:53). Like Smith and Millar (see Callinicos 1.4 and the discussion above) Comte argues that societies developed in stages. However, Comte argued that development from stage to stage occurred as a result of the development of the human mind.

All human thought, he argued, has passed through three separate stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive.

According to Comte, in the theological state, the human mind analyses all phenomena as the result of supernatural forces; feelings and imagination predominate. In the metaphysical stage, abstract ideas such as essences or causes predominate. In the positive stage, the human mind gives up the search for absolute truth and the origin of hidden causes. Instead it attempts, through a combination of reason and observation, to discover ‘the actual laws of phenomena…their invariable relations of succession and likeness’ (Comte in Callinicos: 65). The emphasis in this final stage shifts to the study of facts.

Comte took the view that every science develops in exactly the same way, passing through the separate stages of the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. In the evolution of science, astronomy develops first, followed by physics, chemistry, biology and sociology. Each science develops only on the basis of its predecessors; there is an hierarchical framework dominated by the law of increasing complexity and decreasing generality.

Sociology is particularly dependent on its immediate predecessor in the hierarchy, biology. The science of biology is basically holistic in character, beginning not from isolated elements, as in chemistry and physics, but from organic wholes and systems. In Comte’s view, sociology should
study society as a whole: namely, society defined as a social system. Sociology should investigate the action and reaction of the various parts of the social system. Individual elements must be analysed in their relation to the whole. As with biological organisms, society forms a complex unit irreducible to its component parts: Comte makes the important point that society cannot be simply reduced to the individuals of which it is comprised. Thus, to gain knowledge of the parts, it is essential to examine the whole. Thus Comte is already considerably different to thinkers of the Enlightenment.

Society was defined by Comte, therefore, as a collective organism characterised by a harmony between its individual parts and its whole.

Comte’s contribution to sociological theory was to emphasise that all social phenomena are subject to invariable laws and that the task of social science lay in establishing their reality. Does this mean that there is no room in Comte’s positivism for human beings to take action to change their social situation? Is all action determined by invariable laws? It would seem so: the individual might ‘modify’ the course of social development and assert a freedom of action over ‘blind fatality’, but ultimately the natural laws of society dominate. Social evolution, which for Comte was the progressive development of the human mind as it finds its expression in the three stages, is thus a universal history of humanity that claims the importance of knowledge for the ends of social reorganisation, but subordinates the individual to the inevitable ‘realities’ of social life: the needs of order and progress.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, Enlightenment thought laid the groundwork for the development of social scientific thought in a number of important ways. By asking questions about how and why societies had come to be as they were and about the social and historical conditions that prevailed, Enlightenment thinkers opened up new and very significant areas of inquiry. However, much Enlightenment thought, despite some advances, was unable to escape from its reliance on an idea of an unchanging ‘human nature’ as the foundation for its theoretical consideration of social conditions. The closest it came to a more proper sociological consideration of the social and economic determinants on human action and organisation was in the Scottish Enlightenment’s notion of stages of human social development. But this was based in the precepts of moral philosophy and was ultimately concerned with the discovery of a universal human nature.

The problem for the new social sciences which began to emerge in the early to mid-nineteenth century was therefore to propose a proper object of study (society itself) and a means of studying this which was not based on ideas about ‘human nature’. As we have seen, various developments within Enlightenment thought pointed in this direction without, however, escaping its inherent methodological individualism.
A reminder of your learning outcomes

Having studied this chapter and completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- describe the main intellectual currents of the Enlightenment
- outline and assess the contribution of the ideas of key Enlightenment thinkers
- explain the importance of science in Enlightenment thought
- compare and contrast the similarities and differences between Enlightenment thought and subsequent forms of social scientific thought.

Sample examination questions

1. Explain how Enlightenment thought contributed to the emergence of social science.

2. What are the important differences between Enlightenment thinking and ‘sociological’ thought?
Appendix 1: Full list of Further reading


Appendix 1: Full list of Further reading

Marx, K. ‘Preface’ to A Critique of Political Economy by Marx which you can find at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm