

# An Introduction to Sociology

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J. E. GOLDTHORPE

# AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

J. E. GOLDTHORPE

*Senior Lecturer in Sociology  
University of Leeds*



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# PREFACE

by AUDREY I. RICHARDS

What exactly is sociology? This is the question our friends so often ask us and which we find so difficult to answer precisely. 'The study of society'? Yes, but we are part of society. We live and work and think and play in the context of a society, so that when it comes to the point, there are very few subjects in a university curriculum which cannot be said to have a social bearing. Economics gives us the principles which govern our consumer or producer choices, but it is ultimately our social values which determine how hard we are prepared to work. Economic history asks, and tries to answer, questions which are mainly sociological ones. Social psychology tells us how people behave as members of groups, that is to say of society. We talk of the sociology of medicine, of education, of communications and even of advertisement. Is sociology a separate subject at all, or is it merely a perspective or a point of view?

It is certainly a term which people sometimes find useful just because it is not too precise! Administrators tend to speak of 'sociological factors' when they mean aspects of a problem which are felt to be important, and even disturbing, but for which a ministry has no expert advisers, and no particular government department ready to deal. A project for human betterment has been conceived. Technicians have overcome the practical difficulties. Economists have counted the costs. But yet the scheme does not get off the ground, so to speak. This is the time when people begin to talk gravely of 'sociological factors', meaning, I think, a great variety of human factors such as traditional values and habits of work; the desire to live with a particular group or category of people; conflicts between the different social roles a man or a set of men have to play; or perhaps institutions which provide the wrong kind of leadership or learning processes. Used in this way sociology seems to mean a mixed bag of different factors—a rag-bag if you like!

Yet in spite of the difficulties of definition, sociologists themselves have developed their own spheres of work during the course of the last century and a half and this book tells us what these fields of interest are. Sociology at a university is still a very broad subject. It includes disciplines as

various as social philosophy, criminology and demography. Dr Goldthorpe gives us a glimpse of a number of the problems with which modern sociologists deal. They include the family, marriage and kinship; mechanisms for enforcing law and morals; the organization of magic and religious beliefs; urban studies; and the processes of social change. Some of the most interesting pages for the beginner are those in which he describes quite concretely what the sociologist or the social anthropologist actually does when engaged on research. We can imagine ourselves choosing a sample for an urban survey, sitting in a tent in a Polynesian village, observing ceremonies or agricultural work; or conducting a Gallup poll. Dr Goldthorpe shows us, in fact, that sociology has not only defined its spheres of interest, but has also developed its own techniques of research.

There remains another important question. What kind of society are we going to study? Students naturally want to learn about their own societies in special detail and this book was actually written for the benefit of African students who have had to rely for so long on text-books describing the structure and institutions of Western societies, chiefly those of the United Kingdom and America. Dr Goldthorpe was able to write in this way because he has had the advantage of teaching for some years in an East African university attended by students from all over this region. But he takes his examples not only from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia, but also from America, China, England and Ireland. Sociologists have found in practice that the study of a quite unfamiliar society stimulates a person to examine his own more fruitfully. I believe therefore that students from England and America will find they get new lights on their own problems, if they accept as a starting point Dr Goldthorpe's own interests in Africa and its present-day achievements and difficulties.

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*Part I*  
SOCIOLOGY





## CHAPTER I

# WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology is the scientific study of society. The termination -ology implies a claim to scientific status, while the first part of the word refers to human society. (There could of course be the sociology of non-human societies, and studies have in fact been carried out of the social behaviour of other animals such as ants and chimpanzees. By convention, however, the term sociology is applied to the study only of human society.)

More precisely, sociology represents an attempt to apply to the study of human society the same scientific method and approach that have been so dramatically successful in yielding an understanding of the physical world. Using scientific method, men have gained an understanding of the stars, the sun, the planets; of this planet in particular; of the forms of life that inhabit it; of man as an animal. The quest is far from finished, and the search for more knowledge and more understanding goes on more ardently than ever in the modern world; but the achievements of science have been very great, and we now understand many things that were hidden from our ancestors.

Why not, then, apply the same methods to the task of understanding ourselves? For the last 150 years or so some men have done just that, have tried to turn man's scientific eye upon himself as a social being; with what results we shall see, especially in part 2 of this book. There have not been, perhaps, quite such spectacular results as those in physics, and we cannot claim anything quite so dramatic as space research; but the results are real, some have been useful, and all have helped us to understand how society works.

In chapter 2 we trace the history of the attempt, and follow the growth of the two subjects known as sociology and social anthropology. The relation between these subjects has been a rather intricate one and is not easy to understand except in terms of their history, which we accordingly tell at some length, but, anticipating, let us say now that they are tending more and more to merge into one subject. In principle I think of them as one and when I use the word sociology I hope the reader will add, in his mind, 'and social anthropology'.

## SOCIOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Perhaps the best-known social sciences, apart from sociology and social anthropology, are economics and political science; others, relevant to our purpose, are social psychology and demography. We must also consider subjects like criminology, which can be thought of as specialist studies by sociologists.

Political scientists, ever since Plato's *Republic* was written, have been systematically studying man engaged in the activities of government. About two hundred years ago economists like Adam Smith systematically began to study man engaged in the activities of getting a living and deciding on the allocation of scarce resources between different uses. For about three hundred years there have been studies of population statistics and population trends—such as birth-rates, death-rates, the expectation of life and the statistics of death from different diseases—and these studies are nowadays called demography. Psychologists are concerned with the study of such aspects of human behaviour as perception, memory and learning; social psychologists are those who are interested in these aspects of behaviour as it occurs in a social setting.

Clearly all these studies are related both to one another and to sociology; any distinctions we may choose to make between them are like farmers' fences: we can put them up where we choose, and move them or remove them if they hinder us; they are not given facts of nature. But sociology is wider than any of them. It must be, because there are many important areas of social life which the more specialized social sciences leave out altogether. None of them, for example, has ever told us much about the family, marriage, and kinship in human society. To take a second example, although political scientists can tell us much about how laws are made in different societies, and those who study comparative law can tell us much about the formal organization of courts, etc., through which laws are enforced, if it were not for sociologists we should know next to nothing about the nature and causes of crime, or the effects or efficiency of different methods of treating offenders. Or to take a third example, although modern studies of comparative religion and theology have enormously widened our knowledge of different religious faiths, and also told us something about the organization of different religious bodies, there are many aspects of religion as a human activity which it has been left to sociologists to study, such as the way in which new faiths arise in

times of social stress, and the relation between religious adherence and social class.

Sociology, however, is much more than a mere gap-filler. If that were all, sociologists would be like depressed farmers—latecomers on the scene, having to cultivate poor scrub land between the more favoured holdings of established cultivators. Emphatically we are not like that. Sociology has arisen in part from a conviction that social life needs to be viewed as a whole if it is to be properly understood. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. Sociologists have not hesitated to trespass boldly on the ground of their fellow social scientists in insisting that the political and the economic, the psychological and the demographic aspects of any particular social group or social situation have to be seen in relation to one another. For example, demographic changes like the fall in the birth-rate in some modern industrial societies would remain completely puzzling if they had been studied in demographic terms alone. When sociologists (like Myrdal in Sweden and Banks in England)<sup>1</sup> tackled this problem, their explanations involved, very largely, a study of the way in which economic changes had altered the circumstances in which husbands and wives made decisions affecting the number of their children, while political factors like movements of public opinion, and two notable trials (one in England, one in Sweden) were also of significance.\*

Sociology and social anthropology, therefore, is best seen as a generalizing and synthesizing discipline, including within its scope the more specialized social sciences and concerned to see the relations between all aspects of social life.

#### TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Like other sciences, sociology has its vocabulary of technical terms. Some of these are invented words; many of them, however, are ordinary familiar words which sociologists use in a special technical sense. In this practice sociologists are no different from other scientists. Even so familiar a word as *gas* was invented by chemists in the early nineteenth century; while physicists have refined common words like *force*, *weight*, *mass*, *gravity*, and even *time* to the point at which they have very special meanings a long way removed from those of everyday speech.<sup>2</sup> In exactly the same

\* It is odd that Banks, whose *Prosperity and Parenthood* is a notable example of sociology as a synthesizing discipline, should later have viewed sociology as a specialism. (J. A. Banks, 'The British Sociological Association', *Sociology*, 1, 1967, 1-9.)

way, sociologists sometimes use invented words like *uxorilocal*, and quite often use terms like *class*, *culture*, *organization*, and *institution* in a special sense, more precise than that of ordinary speech. Just as in other sciences, too, a mere vocabulary is not enough and to understand fully the meanings of the words we have to explain them in relation to a system of concepts.

We may start with *action*, the fundamental unit which we, as sociologists, observe. Action may be defined as all behaviour that has meaning. Behaviour is a word we borrow from biologists; it means everything which an organism does. As sociologists, however, there are some aspects of behaviour which we ignore and take for granted, such as the chemistry of vision, the beating of the heart, or the digestive processes. These we do not regard as action because most of the time the human beings concerned are unaware they are going on. They do not even act as signals from one person to another and they have, in our sense, no meaning. Breathing is behaviour most of the time too, but not action, since it has no meaning either for the person concerned or for others. Sometimes, however, particular forms of behaviour may become action. A sigh or a snort may have meaning, both for the actor and for other persons; audible breathing in a ceremony may have meaning, irritating others and showing insufficient respect. To take another example some interesting studies have recently been done on eye movements, which may function as signals between people, even though they are scarcely aware of them. For instance 'At the end of each speech A is likely to Look at B. This is taken as a signal that A has finished and B may speak.'<sup>3</sup> This seems to bring such behaviour quite clearly into the category of action in which sociologists are interested. But these are extreme, borderline cases. Most of the things people do—working, eating, playing, talking—are self-evidently social actions.

Following Parsons, we regard action as taking place in a *situation* which has a number of components or aspects.\* It includes the actor (that is, the person on whose actions we are for the moment focussing our attention) and one or more other actors. It includes the physical environment of the action, for example trees, houses, doors, tables, chairs. It also includes, very importantly, the *expectations* of the actor himself, and other actors. Even if other actors are not physically present, their expectations may play a decisive part in the meaning of the action which we

\* The works of Talcott Parsons contain several different expositions of his analysis. Possibly the fullest and most definitive is in his *The Social System* (1952); a more condensed version is in T. Parsons and E. Shils (eds.), *Towards a General Theory of Action*, part 2 (1951).

observe. Let us take the homely example of a woman cooking. Her situation includes the cooking pots, the fire or stove, the supply of food—the material environment and apparatus, that is—but it also importantly includes the expectations of her husband and children, not home yet, that they will return to find the meal ready; and it includes in turn her own expectations of their expectations, and of their reactions when they do come home ( Such as ‘I’m hungry! When will supper be ready?’).

When actors in a situation are acting according to well-defined expectations in this way, it becomes possible to say that they are assuming *roles*. A role, indeed, can be regarded as a bundle of expectations; the role of a wife/mother consists of all the things she is expected to do for her husband and children. In the case of a diffuse role like that of wife/mother, we need to separate different *role sectors*; in that role, indeed, what the husband expects his wife to do and to be may compete or conflict with what her sons and her daughters may expect of her. There may thus be *intra-role conflict* when the same person occupying the same role is subject to conflicting expectations in the different role sectors.† In addition, we may also get conflict between the expectations upon the same person in different roles which he or she may occupy. Thus the duty to cook for her husband and children in her role as wife may conflict with the same woman’s duty in her role as daughter to go and look after her sick father; or a man’s kinship obligations may conflict with his duties as a teacher or government officer.

An important point about the role concept is that an individual can occupy many roles. Indeed it is almost impossible to avoid occupying several roles in the sphere of kinship alone, where the same person is (as we have seen) wife, mother, daughter, and also daughter-in-law, possibly cousin or clan-sister (according to the particular system of kinship in her society) and so on. In the modern world, as we shall see in chapter 5, there is a tendency for people to occupy more and more different roles in other spheres of life than kinship. Thus besides being a son, grandson, husband, brother, father, etc., a man may also be a bank clerk, a trade union branch secretary, the citizen of a state, member of a political party, churchwarden and youth club helper. From time to time he may further occupy the role of bus passenger—a rather transient role in contrast to the more permanent ones we have just been considering.

† Modern role analysis and earlier views are well summarized in N. Gross *et al.*, *Explorations in Role Analysis* (1958), part I.

Similarly, from time to time he occupies the role of customer (in a shop, in relation to shopkeeper or shop assistant), patient (in relation to a doctor), taxpayer (in relation to a chief or tax inspector), and so on. Some sociologists use the term *role-set* for the whole collection of roles occupied by any one individual.

Every role forms part of a social system or social structure. A role cannot, indeed, be conceived in isolation; it exists solely and completely in its relation to counter-roles. Thus the counter-role of wife is husband; the counter-roles of mother are sons and daughters; the counter-roles of bus conductors are passenger, driver, manager, supervisor. In principle, any social structure can be drawn in diagram form. The kinship diagrams which form part of chapter 4 are examples of social systems or social structures; so are the formal 'organization charts' sometimes to be seen on the wall of a government office or large business. In the same way, informal groups, such as those of students in the same class or hall of residence, can be charted according to their friendship and avoidances. Such charts are sometimes called 'sociograms'. In all such diagrams, whether of formal or informal structures, the lines joining the symbols stand for particular relations. In the kinship diagrams, double lines like this  $\equiv$  represent the relation of marriage; single lines vertically represent descent; single lines horizontally represent the relation between siblings (brothers or sisters). In a sociogram, the lines represent some such relation as that between students who would choose to share a room.

Social systems may be large or small. They range from the small groups we have been considering, such as a family or a group of student friends, through middling-sized systems like that of a clan, a university, a government department or a business firm, to large structures like a whole tribe or a nation-state. Any such structure can be thought of as a system or network of roles.

We now turn to the concept of *culture*, which is of the utmost importance for sociology, since it is what distinguishes man from his closest biological kin among the great apes, and which has enabled man to become, from the biological point of view, an extraordinarily successful animal, growing very rapidly in numbers and dominating the natural environment to a greater extent than any species past or present. Culture consists essentially of a system of tools and a system of symbols, the two systems being closely interrelated. Men not only make tools, they can communicate with one another about the tools, their use, and how to

make them. Moreover, the whole system is learned. Unlike the communications of other animals (which consist of rather simple systems of sounds or other behaviour which instinctively trigger off responses in other animals of the same species), the communications system of culture, which we call language, is learned by each individual. It follows that cultures can change rather rapidly over time—very much more rapidly than if they were biologically inherited and had to be subjected to the slow pressures of natural selection. It also follows that cultures differ from one another so that, for instance, Swahili, Chinese, and English are quite different languages, whereas all birds of the same species communicate by means of the same inherent system of sound and movement symbols.

Culture, then, which may be epitomized as a system of learned symbols, includes the following components:

(1) Material culture—the tools. It is in this sense of the word that archaeologists speak of, for example, Sangoan culture. All that now remains of the culture of the men who used to live at Sango Bay in Uganda are a few of their chipped pebbles—part of their material culture; their language, kinship system, political organization, and so on have vanished for ever.

(2) Language. First and foremost we must remember that the tools by themselves are literally meaningless; they have meaning only in so far as people know how to use them and how to make them, and this involves language, the distinctively human mode of communication through an arbitrary code of learned symbols. Language, however, has wider uses. For example, as we see in chapter 7, it enables man to settle disputes in quite a different way from other animals—by debate and discussion, involving the statement of abstract general principles of right and wrong—in other words, through appeal to law, custom, or morality. Equally, it is the basis for all other distinctively human achievement including art, science, sport, and religion.

(3) Over and above language and technology, therefore, culture includes symbolic values of all kinds—ideas of right and wrong, beliefs, rules and norms, the cultural definitions of the behaviour appropriate to roles, moral and artistic values.

Another way of looking at culture is summed up in the phrase 'the social heritage'. Culture is what we inherit through being members of a particular society or group. First and foremost we think, then, of the cultures of national or tribal groups—Kikuyu, Ibo, Nyakyusa—each

embodied in a language and in a material technology. However, although this is a good first approximation, it is a little too simple. If a man becomes a Muslim he becomes the heir to Islamic culture even though he may also be a Muganda (and heir to Ganda culture). We really have to think of every social system and sub-system as having its own culture or sub-culture. Even so small a group as a single household may develop distinctively different ways of doing things, likes and dislikes—a few words which perhaps have a rather special meaning for the members of that particular family, for example, a specially treasured photograph, or a peculiar taste in breakfast food. It would be accurate to speak of the sub-culture of that particular household, viewed as a sub-system of a larger system, and remembering also that although the sub-culture may be different in a few particulars, in many respects it draws its culture ready-made, as it were, from the surrounding society. The concepts of culture and of social system are thus integrally related.

Perhaps we can illustrate this by considering the simplest possible group, consisting of two people. Such a group may grow up when two students meet at college and, after a while, a relation develops in which one becomes, let us say, the steady studious type while the other is gay and sociable, one habitually lends the other books, lecture notes, etc. This is a brand-new social system, growing up literally out of nothing, in which each develops a stable system of expectations of the other's actions—that is, each assumes a role. Equally we should say that the system has its own sub-culture. At the same time most of the culture of this tiny group is drawn from the wider society that surrounds the two friends. They communicate in some language such as English even though they may make free with it and jokingly use some particular words as a kind of private code. Their material culture is largely 'given', consisting as it does of rooms in a college fitted with desks, tables, beds, etc. Moreover their behaviour to one another will be affected by whatever expectations have been defined in their culture in the very word *friend* itself (or its equivalent, such as mate, buddy, oppo, chum). It will, after all, make a difference if they are of the same sex or of opposite sex. If the latter, strongly culturally defined expectations of the roles respectively of boy- and girl-friend will, most likely, affect their relation—conventions concerning courtship, rules about the admissibility of women into men's halls of residence and vice versa, moral values concerning faithfulness, the exchange of gifts, leading up perhaps to the conventions of engage-



ment and the laws of marriage. These *cultural* aspects come into the situation of the young couple because they influence the expectations upon them of 'significant others'—the individuals who occupy roles in their *social system*, as for example father, mother, father's brother, warden of hall of residence, tutor, or fellow-student.

Finally, both culture and social systems are highly unstable things. Although it may be the case that in the past there have been societies that did not change much over long periods, *change* is now so all-pervasive that it seems more realistic to think of it as the normal state of affairs. Any sensible treatment of sociology, that is, deals with change as it goes along, and does not relegate it to a separate last chapter, as was done in some older textbooks. The study of society, in a word, is the study of social change; and social change has as many aspects as society itself. Thus if we are thinking of culture we must also think of cultural change and consider what happens, for example, when change occurs in the culturally defined expectations of behaviour between husbands and wives—if, for instance, as a result of movements of public opinion husbands become less authoritarian and are expected to talk things over with their wives as equals rather than give them orders—a development that has been called the 'syncratic family'. In such a case we are concerned with change in the content of the relation between two roles which, however, continue to have the same positional relation in the social system. Not all changes are like this. Some are purely structural changes, that is, changes in the social system itself. These may occur when completely new roles are created. For example, the roles of 'foreman' or 'bank clerk' simply did not exist in the traditional social systems of Africa, though they are now commonly enough accepted. In the modern development of African states new social systems like those of the bank, the factory, the mine, the political party, or the university are set up, and people who already occupy a set of traditional roles add others in the new systems to their role-sets. Moreover each of these new social systems has its own culture or sub-culture—its own material technology, its own language (in the technical terms used in mines, banks, political parties, and so on). Thus, as Gluckman<sup>4</sup> has put it, if we insist on using so misleading a term as 'detribalized', we have to think of a man as being 'detribalized' when he rides on a lorry from his homeland to the Copperbelt, 're-tribalized' when he returns, 're-de-tribalized' when he goes a second time, and so on. It is more sensible and more accurate to think of him as moving from one social