

# introduction

*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sociology* as the 'science or study of the origin, history, and constitution of society'. The word sociology is an amalgam of the Latin *socius*, meaning companion (or associate), and the Greek *logus* or *ology*, meaning study or study of – and so a literal meaning of sociology can be rendered as 'the study of companionship'. The first public use of the word 'sociology' appeared in Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842), which held that *positivism* provided the scientific means of illuminating the laws of social change in society. It has often been said that the chief reason for the emergence of sociology was an attempt to comprehend the huge social upheavals produced by the transition from traditional, rural society to modern, industrial society. The work of the classical sociologists, such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies, in the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was largely concerned with exploring the processes that created this modern world.

It took a considerable time for sociology to be accepted as a valid subject in academia. For example, a year after Durkheim was appointed to a Lectureship in Social Science and Education at the University of Bordeaux in 1887 he established *L'Année Sociologique* – the first social science journal in France. However, when he was appointed to a Professorship at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1906, his title was Professor in the Science of Education – though in 1913 this post was retitled as Professor in the Science of Education and Sociology.

The study of sociology was the newest (or last) of the social sciences to establish itself in the English-speaking world. In the USA, though sociology was first taught under that name at the University of Kansas in 1890 and the first academic department of sociology was established in the University of Chicago in 1892, the great expansion of sociology occurred in the USA in the mid-twentieth century. The American Sociological Association (ASA) has described the discipline of sociology in the following way:

Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports. Sociology provides many distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old. The field also offers a range of research techniques that can be applied to virtually any aspect of social life: street crime and delinquency, corporate downsizing, how people express emotions, welfare or education reform, how families differ and flourish, or problems of peace and war. ([www.asanet.org/](http://www.asanet.org/))

Although sociology was first taught in Britain at the London School of Economics in 1904, the establishment of sociology departments in British



universities was predominantly a phenomenon of the 1960s and during this period sociology became a major discipline in British universities. It may be because the late 1960s was also a time of student unrest that there were many who saw the study of sociology as a significant contributory factor in precipitating this unrest. In any event, as Peter Worsley (appointed as the first Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester in 1964) commented some years later:

Some fear the dispassionate examination of society; they think that things may come to light which are better left hidden or unexplained. Sociology is meant to make people (especially students) ‘radical’ or ‘critical’... [consequently] many think of sociology as an academic synonym for socialism [though as Worsley added, in the then Communist countries, sociology had been banned for decades as ‘bourgeois ideology’]. (1977: 19)

The entry for *Sociology* in the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* explained that the difficulty of defining the subject was best conveyed by declaring that the easiest way to have constructed it would be to do nothing except simply cross-reference every other entry within its more than 700 pages. Resisting this temptation, the entry set out three different (though not mutually exclusive) views of what should be the proper subject matter of sociology. Firstly, that primacy should be given to *social structure*, in the sense that there are patterns of relationships between individuals and groups that will exist over and above the individuals located at a certain juncture within these structures – for example, within the *family*. Secondly, that our collective meanings will exist prior to the birth of individuals who are then socialised into them – a position adopted, for instance, in *discourse* analysis. Thirdly, that the proper focus of sociology is on meaningful social action between groups and individuals – for example, in face-to-face encounters or in making *rational choices*.

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens has provided an especially engaging introduction to the sociological perspective and its subject matter, which is well designed to help produce convincing answers to fundamental questions that you might ask yourself and – just as important – that you might well be asked by others, such as ‘What is sociology?’ and ‘Why study sociology?’

Learning sociology means taking a step back from our own personal interpretations of the world, to look at the social influences which shape our lives. Sociology does not deny or diminish the reality of individual experience. Rather, we obtain a richer awareness of our own individual characteristics, and those of others, by developing a sensitivity towards the wider universe of social activity in which we are all involved ... Sociology is the study of human life, groups and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling exercise, having as its subject-matter our own behaviour as social beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of global social processes. (Giddens, 1989: 5, 7–8)





One significant problem you will surely encounter in studying sociology is that in your every-day life you will use many of its concepts, even before you set out to consider them from a sociological perspective (think here of *bureaucracy, community, culture, family, society*). A vital task facing the sociologist is then to present, or rather *re-present*, what is generally familiar or taken-for-granted as unfamiliar or strange, though as John Macionis and Ken Plummer (2008: 4) put it, contrary to the popular view that sociology is merely common sense, it often strains against common sense. And yet a sociological response is often seen as unwelcome or unnecessary:

... most of us think about society and social life without having had any schooling in how to think about society and social life. Indeed, the dominant culture seems to hold dear the belief that we do not require any schooling. We are part of social life – so this belief runs – and so we must quite obviously possess all the understanding required. Intimately connected to this attitude is a positive resistance to any suggestion that sociologists – ‘experts’ in looking at society – may have something to teach ordinary people. (Stones, 1998: 1)

In its discussion of ‘What is Sociology?’ the British Sociological Association (BSA) has made the point that if you become a sociology student you will not be provided with quick answers about matters such as *deviance, class* or *globalisation*, but what you will be equipped with is the means to think about these issues and thereby will be able to look at the world in new ways ([www.britsoc.co.uk](http://www.britsoc.co.uk)). Similarly, *Key Concepts in Sociology* will have succeeded in its purpose if it enables you to *think* about the concepts that it contains and, consequently, to look at the world anew, but to do so in a sociological way. Its chief aims are to provide you with a guide to many of the central areas and issues in sociology that is readily understandable, wide-ranging and thorough in its treatment, and to highlight different perspectives and positions. Each of the 38 substantive entries (two of which are ‘double entries’) is designed to explain a concept, assess its emergence and significance, and identify key sources and authorities, as well as recognise different emphases and approaches and provide further reading.

The choice of entries has, rightly and necessarily, taken account of the ways in which the focus of sociology has changed in recent times. Some of these changes in what is sometimes called ‘the sociological gaze’ may best be depicted as responses to phenomena such as *globalisation* or transformations in communication – what Peter Worsley (in his Preface to the second edition of *Introducing Sociology* when explaining why it was in some respects significantly different from the first edition) referred to as ‘changes in the real world’. Other changes, for example, the increasing attention that has come to be given to *culture*, new approaches to studying the role of women in society – encouraged by *feminism* – and new ways of treating questions of *identity*, in addition to reflecting changes in the ‘real world’, might equally be regarded as having been generated ‘internally’, as sociologists come to pursue new interests or as they modify the way existing interests are treated.





On one hand, many of the entries in *Key Concepts in Sociology* would have been exactly those that sociologists would have expected to find had this book been produced decades ago – for example *Capitalism, Equality* and *Family*. On the other hand, the inclusion of other entries might have come as something of a surprise to earlier generations of sociologists – possibly this applies to *Discourse* and *Feminism*, but very likely this also applies to *Orientalism, Social Exclusion, Postmodernity* and *Everyday Life*.

It is worth noting that while the Index to the second edition of Worsley's *Introducing Sociology* contained multiple entries for *Alienation, Family* and *Bureaucracy*, it had no entries at all for *Discourse, Feminism, Orientalism, Social Exclusion, Postmodern* (or *Postmodernity*) or *Everyday Life*. As Nicholas Abercrombie et al. stated in their Preface to *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, sociology is an 'evolving discipline', and consequently he and his colleagues felt obliged to provide entries on both contemporary issues (provided that, in their words, 'these are perceived to be important and durable'), while also giving due recognition to the 'classical sociological tradition' (2000: vii). Likewise, entries in *Key Concepts in Sociology* include both what might be regarded as 'classic' sociological concepts, such as *Class, Bureaucracy* and *Conflict*, as well as entries on subjects that have become increasingly prominent in sociology in the last decade or two, such as *The Body, Celebrity* and *Risk*. Here, it is necessary to state that the understanding of recent developments in sociology may well be better appreciated through understanding what has gone before – indeed, there is much to be learned from concepts that are now seen to be of less importance in sociology than once was the case.

