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The History of Sociology Is Rooted in Ancient Times

By Ashley Crossman**Updated August 02, 2019**

Although sociology has its roots in the works of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius, it is a relatively new academic discipline. It emerged in the early 19th century in response to the challenges of modernity. Increasing mobility and technological advances resulted in the increasing exposure of people to cultures and societies different from their own. The impact of this exposure was varied, but for some people, it included the breakdown of traditional norms and customs and warranted a revised understanding of how the world works. Sociologists responded to these changes by trying to understand what holds social groups together and also to explore possible solutions to the breakdown of social solidarity.

Thinkers of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century also helped set the stage for the sociologists who would follow. This period was the first time in history that thinkers tried to provide general explanations of the social world. They were able to detach themselves, at least in principle, from expounding some existing [ideology](#) and to attempt to lay down general principles that explained social life.

The Birth of Sociology as a Discipline

The term sociology was coined by French philosopher [Auguste Comte](#) in 1838, who for this reason is known as the “Father of Sociology.” Comte felt that science could be used to study the social world. Just as there are testable facts regarding gravity and other natural laws, Comte thought that scientific analyses could also discover the laws governing our social lives. It was in this [context](#) that Comte introduced the concept of positivism to sociology — a way to understand the social world based on scientific facts. He believed that, with this new understanding, people could build a better future. He envisioned a process of social change in which sociologists played crucial roles in guiding society.

Other events of that time period also influenced the development of [sociology](#). The 19th and 20th centuries were times of many social upheavals and changes in the social order that

interested the early sociologists. The political revolutions sweeping Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries led to a focus on social change and the establishment of social order that still concerns sociologists today. Many early sociologists were also concerned with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism and socialism. Additionally, the growth of cities and religious transformations were causing many changes in people's lives.

Other classical theorists of sociology from the late 19th and early 20th centuries include Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, W.E.B. DuBois, and Harriet Martineau. As pioneers in sociology, most of the early sociological thinkers were trained in other academic disciplines, including history, philosophy, and economics. The diversity of their training is reflected in the topics they researched, including religion, education, economics, inequality, psychology, ethics, [philosophy](#), and theology.

These pioneers of sociology all had a vision of using sociology to call attention to social concerns and bring about social change. In Europe, for example, Karl Marx teamed with wealthy industrialist Friedrich Engels to address class inequality. Writing during the Industrial Revolution, when many factory owners were lavishly wealthy and many factory workers despairingly poor, they attacked the rampant inequalities of the day and focused on the role of capitalist economic structures in perpetuating these inequalities. In Germany, Max Weber was active in politics while in France, Emile Durkheim advocated for educational reform. In Britain, Harriet Martineau advocated for the rights of girls and women, and in the U.S., W.E.B. DuBois focused on the problem of [racism](#).

The Modern History of Sociology

The growth of sociology as an academic discipline in the United States coincided with the establishment and upgrading of many universities that were including a new focus on graduate departments and curricula on "modern subjects." In 1876, Yale University's William Graham Sumner taught the first course identified as "sociology" in the United States. The University of Chicago established the first graduate department of sociology in the United States in 1892 and by 1910, most colleges and universities were offering sociology courses. Thirty years later, most of these schools had established sociology departments. Sociology was first taught in high schools in 1911.

Sociology was also growing in Germany and France during this period. However, in Europe, the discipline suffered great setbacks as a result of World Wars I and II. Many [sociologists](#) were killed or fled Germany and France between 1933 and the end of World War II. After World War II, sociologists returned to Germany influenced by their studies in America. The result was that American sociologists became the world leaders in theory and research for many years.

Sociology has grown into a diverse and dynamic discipline, experiencing a proliferation of specialty areas. The American Sociological Association (ASA) was formed in 1905 with 115 members. By the end of 2004, it had grown to almost 14,000 members and more than 40

“sections” covering specific areas of interest. Many other countries also have large national sociology organizations. The International Sociological Association (ISA) boasted more than 3,300 members in 2004 from 91 different countries. The ISA sponsored research committees covering more than 50 different areas of interest, covering topics as diverse as children, aging, families, law, emotions, sexuality, religion, mental health, peace and war, and work.

Sources

"About ASA." American Sociological Association, 2019.

"Statutes of the International Sociological Association." International Sociological Association.