Society and Social Interaction

Learning Objectives

Types of Societies

- Describe the difference between pre-industrial, industrial, and postindustrial societies
- Understand the role of environment on preindustrial societies
- Understand how technology impacts societal development

Theoretical Perspectives on Society

- Describe Durkhiem's functionalist view of society
- Understand the conflict theorist view of society
- Explain Marx's concepts of class and alienation
- Identify how symbolic interactionists understand society

Social Constructions of Reality

- Understand the sociological concept of reality as a social construct
- Define roles and describe their place in people's daily interactions
- Explain how individuals present themselves and perceive themselves in a social context

Types of Societies

Society - a group of people who live in a definable community and share the same culture, beliefs and ideas. More advanced societies also share a political authority.

Gerhard Lenski (1924–) defined societies in terms of their technological sophistication.

Advancement of society -> advancement of technology. Societies:
1) pre-industrial 2) industrial 3) post-industrial

Preindustrial Societies

the Industrial Revolution, societies were small,
dependent on < local resources. Economic
only from human labour.

Hunter-Gatherer ~10,000–12,000 years ago; based around kinship or tribes. Food: wild animals and uncultivated plants. When resources became scarce, the group moved to a new area -> nomadic. Were common until several hundred years ago; today only a few hundred remain, such as indigenous Australian tribes (aborigines) or Bushmen in South Africa.

Pastoral ~7,500 years ago. Human societies began to tame and breed animals and to grow and cultivate their own plants. Also nomadic – need in fresh feeding grounds for animals. Enough food, +clothing and transportation -> a surplus of goods -> specialized occupations, trading with local groups.

Horticultural - depletion of crops or water supply -> pastoral societies to relocate in search of food for their livestock. **Horticultural societies** formed in areas where rainfall and other conditions allowed them to grow stable crops -> permanent settlements -> more stability and more material goods.
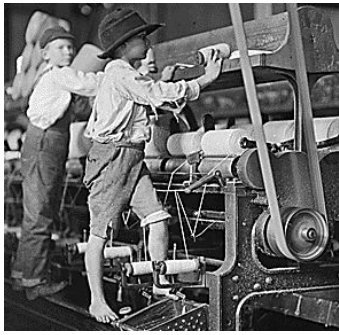
Preindustrial Societies

Agricultural

- While pastoral and horticultural societies used small, temporary tools such as digging sticks or hoes, agricultural societies relied on permanent tools for survival -> Agricultural Revolution. Human settlements -> towns and cities, centers of trade and commerce.
- This is also the age in which people had the time to engage in more contemplative and thoughtful activities, such as music, poetry, and philosophy.
- First division of societies: those who had more resources could afford better living and developed into a class of nobility. Difference in social standing between men and women increased. As cities expanded, ownership and preservation of resources became a pressing concern.

Feudal

Strict hierarchical system of power based around land ownership and protection. The nobility gave to vassals pieces of land which was then cultivated by the lower class. Power was handed down through family lines, with peasant families serving lords for generations and generations.

Industrial Society

- **Industrial revolution** – invention of steam power, rise of factories, etc. -> **productivity** increased -> **urban centers**. Workers flocked to factories for jobs, and the populations of cities became increasingly diverse. The new generation became less preoccupied with maintaining family land and traditions, and more focused on acquiring wealth and achieving upward mobility for themselves and their family.

- It was during the 18th and 19th centuries of the Industrial Revolution that **sociology** was born. Life was changing quickly. Masses of people were moving to new environments and often faced horrendous conditions of filth, overcrowding, and poverty

- **Power** moved from the hands of the aristocracy to **business**-savvy newcomers who amassed fortunes in their lifetimes. Families such as the Rockefellers became the new power players, using their influence in business to control aspects of government as well.

Postindustrial Society

Postindustrial societies/ Information societies/ Digital societies – recent development. Unlike industrial societies that are rooted in the production of material goods, information societies are based on the **production of information and services.**

18th-19th centuries - steam engine, John D. Rockefeller
21st century - digital technology Steve Jobs, Bill Gates

Since the economy of information societies is driven by knowledge and not material goods, **power** lies with those in charge of storing and distributing **information**. Members of a postindustrial society are **sellers of services** - software programmers or business consultants, for example—instead of producers of goods.

Social classes are divided by access to education, since without technical skills, people in an information society lack the means for success.

Émile Durkheim and Functionalism

Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917): interconnectivity of all of society's elements. Individual behavior is not the same as collective behavior, and studying collective behavior is quite different from studying an individual's actions.

Communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society - **collective conscience**. In his quest to understand what causes individuals to act in similar and predictable ways, he wrote,

"If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as punishment" (Durkheim 1895).

Durkheim agreed with the idea of society as a living organism, in which each organ plays a necessary role in keeping the being alive ->Even the socially deviant members of society are necessary, as **punishments for deviance affirm established cultural values and norms**. That is, punishment of a crime reaffirms our moral consciousness. "A crime is a crime because we condemn it" (Durkheim 1893). Durkheim called these elements of society **"social facts."** By this, he meant that social forces were to be considered real and existed outside the individual.

Émile Durkheim and Functionalism

In his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim argued that as society grew more complex, social order made the transition from mechanical to organic.

Mechanical solidarity - type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture. Societies with mechanical solidarity act in a mechanical fashion; things are done mostly because they have always been done that way. This type of thinking was common **in preindustrial societies** where strong bonds of kinship and a low division of labor created shared morals and values among people. When people tend to do the same type of work, they tend to think and act alike.

In industrial societies, mechanical solidarity is replaced with **organic solidarity**, social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences. In capitalist societies division of labor becomes so specialized that everyone is doing different things. Instead of punishing members of a society for failure to assimilate to common values, organic solidarity allows people with differing values to coexist.

Durkheim: once a society achieves organic solidarity, it has finished its development.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory

Superstructure (government, family, religion, education, culture)
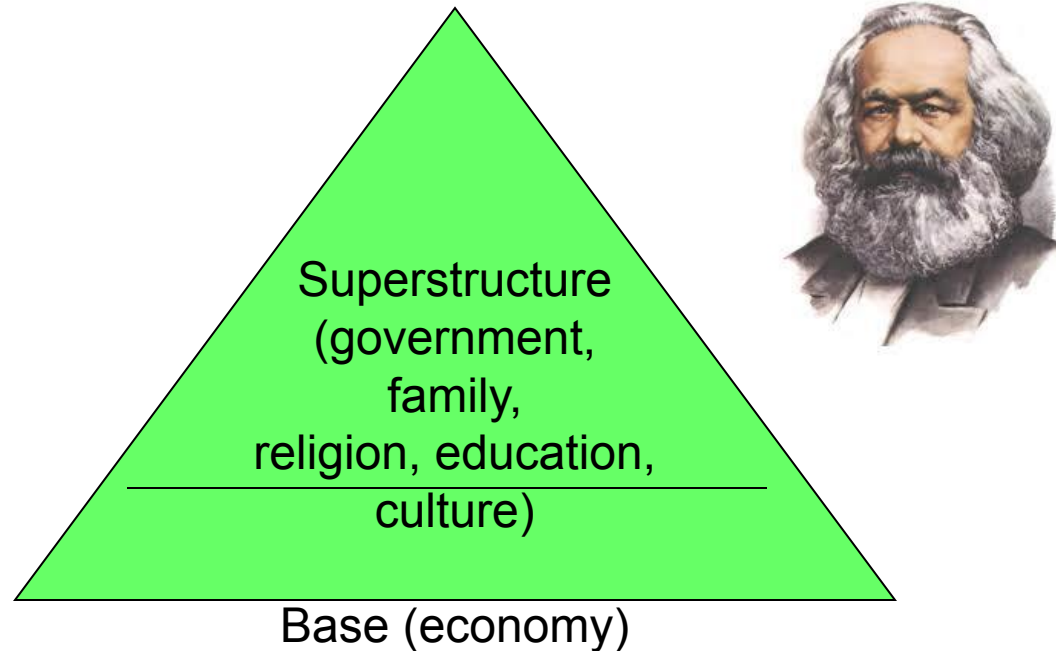
Base (economy)

Marx: the idea of "base and superstructure." Society's economic character forms its base, upon which rests the culture and social institutions, the superstructure. For Marx, it is the **base (economy)** that **determines what a society will be like.**

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory

Marx described modern capitalist society in terms of **alienation**. The idea that in capitalist system of production worker loses the ability to determine his/her life, when **deprived of the right to think of himself as the director of his actions**; to determine the character of said actions; to define his relationship with other people; and to own the things and use the value of the goods and services, produced with his labour.

Although the worker is an autonomous, self-realised human being, as an economic entity, he/she is directed to goals and diverted to **activities** that **are dictated by the bourgeoisie**, who own the means of production, who own the means of production, in order to extract from the worker the maximal amount of surplus value.

Types of Alienation:

- Alienation from the product of one's labor
- Alienation from the process of one's labor
- Alienation from others
- Alienation from one's self

Q.: But why, then, does the modern working class not rise up and rebel? (Indeed, Marx predicted that this would be the ultimate outcome and collapse of capitalism.)

Max Weber and Symbolic Interactionism

- Weber, like Marx: structure of society is defined by both economic (class) and non-economic factors (status). Status: education, kinship, and religion. Class + Status = Power – unlike Marx

- Weber's analysis of modern society: concept of **rationalization**. A rational society is one built around logic and efficiency rather than morality or tradition. To Weber, capitalism is entirely rational. Although this leads to efficiency and merit-based success, it can have negative effects when taken to the extreme. In some modern societies, this is seen when routines lead to a mechanized work environment.

- Example of the extreme conditions of rationality: Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* (1936). Chaplin's character performs a routine task to the point where he cannot stop his motions even while away from the job. Indeed, today we even have a recognized medical condition that results from such tasks, known as "repetitive stress syndrome."

Max Weber and Symbolic Interactionism

The **symbolic interactionism** theory is based on Weber's early ideas that emphasize the viewpoint of the **individual and how that individual relates to society**. For Weber, the culmination of industrialization, rationalization -> the **iron cage** in which the individual is trapped by institutions and bureaucracy. This leads to a sense of "disenchantment of the world" (Weber).

Indeed a dark prediction, but one that has, at least to some degree, been borne out (Gerth and Mills 1918).

In a rationalized, modern society, we have supermarkets instead of family-owned stores. We have chain restaurants instead of local eateries. Superstores that offer a multitude of merchandise have replaced independent businesses that focused on one product line, such as hardware, groceries, automotive repair, or clothing. Shopping malls offer retail stores, restaurants, fitness centers, even condominiums. This change may be rational, but is it universally desirable?

Social Constructions of Reality

- In 1966 sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book called *The Social Construction of Reality*. In it, they argued that society is created by humans and human interaction, which they call **habitualization**. Habitualization describes how "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be … performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Not only do we construct our own society, but we accept it as it is because others have created it before us. Society is, in fact, "habit."
- Ex.: your university exists as a university and not just as a building because you and others agree that it is a university. In a sense, it exists by consensus, both prior and current

Social Constructions of Reality

- Another way of looking at this concept is through W.I. Thomas's notable **Thomas theorem** which states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928). That is, people's behavior can be determined by their subjective construction of reality rather than by objective reality. For example, a teenager who is repeatedly given a label—overachiever, player, bum—might live up to the term even though it initially wasn't a part of his character.

Roles and Status

Roles are patterns of behavior that we recognize in each other that are representative of a person's social status. Currently, while listening to this lecture, you are playing the role of a student. However, you also play other roles in your life, such as "daughter"/"son" or "neighbor."

Status - the responsibilities and benefits of a person according to his role in society. **Ascribed status** – the one you do not select: son, elderly person, or female. **Achieved status** - obtained by choice, such as a high school dropout, self-made millionaire, or nurse.

Role strain – too many roles. Ex.: duties of a parent: cooking, cleaning, driving, problem-solving, acting as a source of moral

Role conflict - one or more roles are contradictory. A parent who also has a full-time career can experience role conflict on a daily basis. When you are working toward a promotion but your children want you to come to their school play, which do you choose? Our roles in life have a great effect on our decisions and who we become.

Presentation of Self

- **Role performance** is how a person expresses his or her role. Sociologist Erving Goffman presented the idea that a person is like an actor on a stage (dramaturgical theory). -> people use **"impression management"** to present themselves to others as they hope to be perceived. Each situation is a new scene, and individuals perform different roles depending on who is present (Goffman 1959).
- Think about the way you behave around your friends versus the way you behave around your parents versus the way you behave with a date. Even if you're not consciously trying to alter your personality, your parents, friends, and date probably see different sides of you.
- Ex.: you and your friends who came to your home as guests