

REVISED EDITION

Introduction to Basic Concepts in

GOVERNMENT, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

A Text For GES 103



A publication of
Centre for General Studies
University of Ibadan.



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GES 103: GOVERNMENT, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

Preface
Contributors

Introduction: The Object and Nature of the Course
A. A. A.

1. The Study of Politics and the Concept of Government
A. A. A.
2. Organisation and Core Features of Government
A. A. A.

Edited by

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Definition, Focus and Relevance of Sociology
A. A. A.

Basic Methods in Sociological Research
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Concept of Economic Development
A. A. A.

Growth and Development of Nigeria
A. A. A.

IBADAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

2019

IBADAN LIBRARY UNIVERSITY

Ibadan University Press,
Publishing House,
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria

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First Published 2019

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ISBN: 978 – 978 – 8529 – 85 – 9

Printing & Binding: Alafas Nigeria Company

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DEFINITION, FOCUS AND RELEVANCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Patricia Taiwo

Introduction

The term 'sociology' was formed from the Latin word 'socius' which means 'companion or associate' and the Greek word 'logia' which refers to 'study of'. So literally it is defined as the study of associations, but generally, Sociology can be defined as the scientific study of human society. It can also be defined as the study of all human interactions and relationships. It can also be referred to as study of social groups.

The term sociology was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who referred to sociology as the apex of the achievement of all sciences. Of course before the philosopher coined the name, various societies at their levels of civilisations have understudied human relationships and structures through the interplay of biological abilities, available resources in the environment, and the agency of time, and have come up with technologies that assist in documenting their societal patterns in forms of cultures, arts, music, customs and tradition, and structures which are thereby handed over to generations by their custodians. And so the concept of sociology existed before the name itself. Although not until the crisis attached to industrialisation and the revolution of the French society, did the term sociology become a field of study. So historically, sociology was birthed as a result of the upheaval in the 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain, Western Europe, especially in Germany and France.

The major upheavals that gave birth to the emergence of sociology were the Industrial Revolution which began in Great Britain, the French Political Revolution of 1789, the Enlightenment and advances in natural sciences and technology. Sociology as a discipline was born in the 18th and 19th centuries when the world

was changing dramatically and quickly as industrial production replaced agriculture, as democratic republics replaced monarchies, and as city life replaced country life. All these changes brought about a lot of social issues, the contradiction in the social system, child labour, crime, poverty, affluence, misery, war and many more which posed a great challenge to the pioneers of that time. Realising how many great insights science had lent regarding the natural world, pioneers of sociology were constrained to think of a science that can help explain, analyse and interpret the fundamental laws that govern the social phenomena and resolve social crises, and decided to try to use the same method as the natural sciences to understand the social world. Hence Comte, a French social philosopher coined sociology, a discipline birthed from social crises to solve social crises, as people began applying the scientific method to human life and behaviour. Pioneers of the discipline are French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), German philosopher and economic historian Karl Max (1818-1883), British Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1893), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Max Weber (1864-1920), amongst several others.

As mentioned, a central theme in understanding sociology is 'human society,' society generally refers to the social world with all its structures, institutions, organisations, etc, around us, and specifically to a group of people who live within some type of bounded territory and who share a common way of life. This common way of life shared by a group of people is termed culture (Stockard 1997). Society is also a large human grouping that shares a common culture and that possesses comprehensive social system including all of those social institutions required to meet basic needs (Hobbs and Blanks 1975), or it could be defined as a system of interrelationships which connect individuals together (Giddens 1994). All of these definitions are suitable for referring to human societies.

Sociology is a discipline in the social sciences that uses systematic methods of empirical investigation and critical analysis to develop and refine a body of knowledge about human social structure and activity, sometimes with the goal of applying such knowledge to the pursuit of government policies designed to benefit the general social welfare (Zerihun 2005).

Compared to other social sciences, sociology is a broad discipline which covers virtually all aspects of social life not just a particular social life. There is hardly any aspect of life that has not been a subject of sociological study—music, relationship, inequality, death, health, drug, work life, sexuality, education, religion and a lot more have been examined sociologically, and because the subjects of sociology are numerous, a single definition for sociology is quite a difficult task but several scholars and schools have tried to define sociology, as the following.

Comte defined sociology as the study of social dynamic and social static, the former signifying the changing, progressing and developmental dimensions of society, while the latter refers to social order and those elements of society and social phenomena which tend to persist and are relatively permanent, defying change. In 1839, Comte defined sociology as the science of human association or the study of gregarious life. In 1851, he attempted to give more flesh and blood to the said definition in his work, "System of Positive Politics." He conceived of sociology as an abstract theoretical science of social phenomena. According to him it is the business of sociology to discover and abstract social laws and thereby to explain the social phenomena (Cragun, Cragun and Poitr 2010).

Anthony Giddens defined Sociology as the scientific study of society, which is interested in the study of social relationships between people in the group context. Sociology is interested in how we as human beings interact with each other (the pattern of social interaction); the laws and principles that govern social relationships and interactions; the influence of the social world on the individuals, and *vice versa* (*Ibid*). It deals with a factually observable subject matter, depends upon empirical research, and involves attempts to formulate theories and generalisations that will make sense of facts (Giddens 1982). Also Soroka (1992) said: "Sociology is a debunking science; that is, it looks for levels of reality other than those presented in official interpretations of society and people's common sense explanations of the social world. Sociologists are interested in understanding what is and do not make value judgments."

Max Weber, who is generally considered to be one of the founders of sociology, said this about the discipline:

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effect. In "action" is included all human behaviour when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it. Action in this sense maybe either overt or purely inward or subjective, it may consist of positive intervention in a situation, or of deliberately refraining from such intervention or passively acquiescing in the situation. Action in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

Sociology is a social science which studies the processes and patterns of human individual and group interaction, the forms of organisation of social groups, the relationships among them, and group influences on individual behaviour, and vice versa, and the interaction between one social group and the other (Team of Experts 2000).

Emile Durkeim defined sociology as the study of social facts. By social facts, he meant the patterns of behaviour that characterise a social group in a given society that should be studied objectively. The job of a sociologist, therefore, is to uncover social facts and then to explain them using other social facts (Macionis 1997; Clahoun et al. 1994). Harry M. Johnson writes: "Sociology is the science that deals with social groups: their internal forms or modes of organisation, the processes that tend to maintain or change these forms of organisation, and the relations between groups." Wright and Randall (1978) defined sociology as the study of the relationships existing between people living together in groups; it tries to discern patterns in those relationships which may justify or refute generalisations about them.

Ogunbameru opined that sociology is the study of social life, social change and the social causes and consequences of human behaviour, also, that sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organisations and societies, and how people interact within these contexts; since all human behaviour is social, the subject matter of sociology then ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mobs; from organised crime to religious cults; from the division 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, providing distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old (Ogunbameru 2009). Henry Fairchild defines sociology as the study of man and his human environment in their relations to each other. Morris Ginsberg defines sociology in the following way "In the broadest sense, sociology is the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences".

It is important to note that the diversities of definitions of sociology, does not mean the discipline doesn't have coherence as emphasised by Abraham (1977) that the vagueness of the many definitions given to sociology must not mislead us into thinking the subject matter of sociology is uncertain, rather, the various definitions of sociology are all designed to emphasise a special way of looking at social behaviour which no other discipline can do as well. The definitions touched areas such as

- ❖ Sociology as a science;
- ❖ The structure and function of society as a system;
- ❖ The nature, complexity and contents of human social behaviour;
- ❖ The fundamentals of human social life;
- ❖ Interaction of human beings with their external environment;
- ❖ The indispensability of social interactions for human development;
- ❖ How the social world affects us, etc.

What Sociology is Not

Having examined the term, history and concept of sociology it is pertinent to make explicit that with the information provided

above, sociology can be distinguished not only as a discipline but in the following terms too.

Sociology is not a discussion at the vendor's stand, as is the habit of an average Nigerian worker in the early hours of the morning; people gather in twos and threes and begin to discuss social issues and concerns. Although social in nature, this is not sociology in that a discussion about social issues alone cannot suffice as a discipline firstly because, individuals respond or discuss from their circumference of understanding and they see social issues from their self-centred and individualistic perspective, and secondly, the absence of a system of methodised knowledge; science.

Sociological Imagination

To be able to explain the social world, the best way to achieve this is to look at our experiences in light of what is going on world around us; the ability to look beyond individual psychology to the many and varied facets of social and cultural forces, and "the recurring patterns in peoples' attitudes and actions, and how these patterns vary across time, cultures and social groups" (Henslin and Nelson 1995). A tool propounded by Wright C. Mills (1916-1962) called sociological imagination, can help turn mere discussions to sociological study. Mills called the ability to study 'the structure of society' at the same time as 'individual lives' the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). He argued that sociological imagination helps us understand that there is a connection between the individual problems and social issues, and that individual problems can only be understood in the context of wider social forces. And as sociologists the sociological imagination could help individuals cope with the social world by helping them to step outside of their personal, self-centred view of the world.

Sociological imagination is a particular way of looking at the world around us through sociological lenses. This helps us to appreciate the social and non-biological forces that affect, influence and shape our lives as individuals, groups, and communities (Giddens 1982). In employing the sociological imagination, people are able to see the events and social structures that influence behaviour, attitudes, and culture.

To put in perspective, this emphasises the combination of structural theories (functionalism and Marxism) and interactionism theories of society. Sociologists believe that good sociology must examine both the structure of society and interaction. They believe it is only through a combination of the study of the major changes in the society and individual lives that we can develop an understanding of social life (Haralambos and Holborn 2008).

The sociological imagination goes beyond armchair sociology or common sense. Armchair sociology refers to an attempt to understand how the social world works without employing scientific methods. Many people believe they understand the world and the events taking place within it, even though they have not actually engaged in a systematic attempt to understanding the social world, as sociologists do (Durkheim and Lewis 1997). Sociologists do not just propose theories about how the social world works. Sociologists get up from their armchairs and enter the social world by testing their theories about how the world works using the scientific method.

What is a Scientific Method?

The idea of engaging scientific method in the study of social life is referred to as positivism in sociology. Positivism, according to the founder of the 'positive philosophy' (sociology), Auguste Comte (1798-1857), came as a result of the rejection of metaphysical explanation to the happenings in the society, for knowledge based on systematic observation and experiment. Thus, scientific method is a logical system used to evaluate data derived from systematic observation (unlike the physical sciences) on society and social phenomena. The end result of the scientific method is that it yields a law. The positivist approach seeks to explain and to predict social phenomena. Of course, sociologists are interested not only in explaining but also in predicting given knowledge of variables and the relationships thereof. The scientific method includes observation, hypothesis, deductions and theories. Predictions from these theories are tested. If a prediction turns out to be correct, the theory survives. If not, the theory is modified or discarded.

The essential elements of a scientific method are iterations and recursions of the following four steps:

- (1) Characterisation (operationalisation or quantification, observation and measurement)
- (2) Hypothesis (a theoretical, hypothetical explanation of the observation and measurement)
- (3) Prediction (logical deduction from the hypothesis)
- (4) Experiment (test of all of the above; in the social sciences, experiments is often replaced with a different form of data analysis)

Sociology as a science employs two very important approaches in research design and in the overall research framework: inductive method and deductive method. Inductive method is a method by which the scientist first makes observation and collects data, on the basis of which he or she formulates hypothesis and theories (Scupin and DeCorse 1995). The researcher tries to build theories from particular observations and instances. Induction moves from the particular to the general; whereas deduction moves from the general to the particular. In deductive approach, the researcher attempts to derive specific assertions and claims from a general theoretical principle. In short, deductive approach in research goes from general theory to particular claims (Dooley 1995:65-66).

One importance of scientific method in sociology is that the scientific method helps us in observing the world critically, empirically and rationally to collect and analyse data systematically to arrive at a scientific knowledge.

Focus of Sociology

Sociology focuses on the social interaction that takes place in the society. The focal point of sociology is the investigation, description, and analysis of social interaction (Hobbs and Blank 1975). 'Social' indicates that the sociological concern is not with humans as biological beings nor humans as isolated beings but to be involved with others and by 'interaction,' Hobbs and Blank referred to what people do—their behaviour as oriented between or among individuals. Social interaction refers to behaviour between two or more people that is given meaning.

Compared to psychology which deals with individuals, sociology as a discipline is less concerned with individual behaviours, only when patterns of behaviour is related to the wider context in which people live can it be an object of study for sociologists. So sociology looks beyond individual behaviour but interactions, and through social interaction, people react and change, depending on the actions and reactions of others. Since society changes as new forms of human behaviour emerge, change is always in the works.

An example of this is Emile Durkheim's work on Suicide. In 1897, Durkheim did a study on suicide (an individual act) the study showed that rates of suicide varied between countries and between social groups. For example, England consistently had a higher rate of suicide rate than France, and married people had lower suicide rates than the unmarried. Durkheim concluded that suicide, an apparently individual act, was actually shaped by social factors, one factor which Durkheim thought was important to suicide was the extent to which individuals were integrated into social groups. For example, married people with children who belonged to a close knit religious community were much less likely to commit suicide than childless single people who were not involved in a religious community (Holborn 2008).

Sociologists are primarily interested in human beings as they appear in social interaction and the effect of this interaction on human behaviour. Such interaction can range from the first physical contacts of the newborn baby with its mother to a philosophical discussion at an international conference, from a casual passing on the street to the most intimate of human relationships (World Book Encyclopedia 1994). Sociologists are interested in the processes of these interactions and in what context such interactions occur. The major systems or units of interaction that interest sociologists are social groups such as the family or peer groups; social relationships, such as social roles and dyadic relationships, and social organisations such as governments, corporations and school systems to such territorial organisations as communities and schools (Broom and Selzinki 1973). Aside social interactions, other works recorded that social relations, social stratification, culture and deviance are also the traditional focus of sociology.

Sociologists focus on the interactions that happen in the society through two major levels which can also be termed the two basic approaches in sociology, which are, the macro-level (macro-sociology) and the micro-level (micro-sociology):

- ❖ Macro-level looks at the interactions that happen in the larger society. The goal of macro-sociology is to examine the large-scale social phenomena that determine how social groups are organised and positioned within the social structure, like social class and the relationships of groups to one another, and social structures. Macro-sociology analyses the social system as a whole and focuses on population. It deals with statistical analysis and it also incorporates empirical studies to come into conclusion. Macro-sociology focuses on broad subjects but their findings can be applied to small phenomena as well.
- ❖ Micro-level of analysis focuses on social interaction. It analyses interpersonal relationships, and what people do and how they behave when they interact. This level of analysis is usually employed by symbolic interactionist perspective. Micro-sociology deals with the nature of human behaviour and human social interaction based on small-scale studies, and it uses interpretation methods to analyse collected data, and by observing the different methods of interaction among individuals, it draws its conclusion on human behaviour.
- ❖ Some scholarly works believe there is a meso level which analyses human social phenomena in between the micro-and macro-levels.

Within this framework, sociology examines social issues in the society in the light of social order that exists in and between systems and social class as well as within the smaller units of the society, social control, changes that have occurred in any level, social groups being created and recreated and the social problems occurring at every level of society;

- **Social Organisation and Social Order:** Focuses on institutions and groups, their formation and change, manner of functioning, relation to individuals and to each other.
- **Social Control:** Focuses on the ways in which members of a society influence one another so as to maintain social order.
- **Social Change:** Focuses on the way society and institutions change over time through technical inventions, cultural diffusion and cultural conflict, and social movements, among others.
- **Social Processes:** Focus on the pattern in which social change takes place, and the modes of such processes.
- **Social Groups:** Focus on how social groups are formed, structured, and how they function and change.
- **Social Problems:** Focus on the social conditions which cause difficulties for a large number of persons and which the society is seeking to eliminate. Some of the problems may include: juvenile delinquency, crime, chronic alcoholism, suicide, narcotics addiction, racial prejudice, ethnic conflict, war, industrial conflict, slum, areas, urban poverty, prostitution, child abuse, problem of older persons, marital conflicts, etc.

Relevance of Sociology

From these discussions it is evident that sociology is of immense importance to understanding the society. Perhaps the first relevance of sociology is that it helps us understand ourselves, the reason why we think the way we think, behave and act the way we do, and why we do the things we do, through understanding of the concept of 'culture' and 'socialisation'. Sociology helps us to understand our diversities and commonalities through the instrument of culture, which covers the totality of our lives, not only of our present but of course our origin and history through anthropological studies, which is embedded in sociology. Ogunbameru opined that people often speak of human nature as though deep within us there lies some reservoir of natural impulses that determine the way that we behave, however, there is no such thing as human nature, for the way that we think, behave, and feel are shaped by what sociologists call the process of socialisation (Ogunbameru 2009).

Sociology provides us with self-enlightenment because sociology gives more knowledge about the conditions of our own lives, and about the way our society and social system function. As such knowledge increases, we can be more empowered to influence the direction of forces and circumstances that affect our lives. We can also be more responsive to the various policies set by governments; and can suggest our own policy initiatives and alternatives (Giddens, *op cit*).

Secondly, aside from its intellectual relevance, sociology helps us to understand the society and its workings. Peter Burger in *Invitation to Sociology* (1966) argues that sociology can help people to take charge of their lives by making them aware of their situation in societies and the forces acting upon them—instead of seeing the way they live as natural or inevitable, they learn that it is socially constructed. This is essentially important because it enlightens people about how their lives evolved to what it is now, not as a result of nature but as a result of the workings of the society, and that people have the ability to make their lives as well as the society what they intend them to be. For example, in a community in Cairo, women believed that some ill health occurrences were 'fatal'—by fatal they meant that illness is meant to happen and cannot be avoided by effort or foreknowledge and to be accepted as an inevitable fact of life. Burger further said that by understanding the workings' of the society, they gain an understanding of how this process takes place; sociology then helps us to explain the world and our lives better.

Also, sociology affords us the luxury of sociological imagination; a rich understanding of our individual lives in a wider social context. This is important because viewing our lives from our individual perspectives limits our horizon to explaining our lives outside the social issues, and with social imagination we can understand that unemployment, war, and marital breakdown are experienced by people in terms of the problems they produce in their personal lives and then their reactions to these as individuals have consequences for the society as a whole (Haralambos and Holborn 2008). This imagination helps us look beyond individual psychology to other social forces, for example, very specific circumstances might lead to one person becoming unemployed, but

when unemployment rates in society rises, it becomes a public issue that needs to be explained. An understanding of these helps us to understand, change and improve our lives. Consequentially, learning sociology helps to cast aside our own biased assumptions, stereotypes and ethno-centric thinking and practices to become more critical, broad-minded and respectful in our interpersonal and inter-group relationships.

Sociology helps us understand the structure and dynamics of society, and their connections to patterns of human behaviour, it helps us to see ways in which social structures (class, race, stratification) and social institutions (family, economy, political or religious) affect our attitudes, actions and interactions. We become more sensitive towards the social issues. It helps us understand how social forces influence our goals, attitudes, behaviour, and personality. Furthermore, application of sociological knowledge, principles, methods, concepts and theories provide the solutions to the contemporary social pathologies. Sociology plays practical roles to tackle social pathologies. Sociological knowledge is highly applicable in dealing with today's most crucial social problems, and in facilitating developmental activities in socioeconomic sectors (Zerihun 2005). Sociology helps to understand the root of problems like poverty, divorce, corruption, crime and delinquencies, robbery, and the rest.

The study of society contributes to the formulations of social policies; descriptive sociology provides a great deal of information that is helpful in making decisions on social policy. For example, the solution to poverty requires investigation of facts by a sociologist, and such research undoubtedly influences social policy. Sociology is also relevant in that it prepares individuals for careers and fields like conducting social scientific research, doing social work, personnel work, human relations in industry, public relations, social services, as well as community planning.

Sociologists, especially those trained in research procedures, are relevant in government, industry, town planning, social work, communication administration and other areas of community life, teaching in colleges and universities. The relevance of sociology is further provided by the fact that the subject is included in engineering (industrial sociology), agriculture (rural sociology) and some other disciplines.

Sociology is relevant because of its contribution to solving international problems. The progress made by the physical sciences has brought the nations of the world nearer, but in the social field, the world has been left behind by the revolutionary progress of science; politically the world is dividing giving rise to stress and conflict. Nations fight with each other with more fiery instruments of modern warfare, countries propagate against each other to acquire narrow goals, and in this context, sociology becomes important because it helps us understand and proffer solutions to underlying causes and tensions.

Sociology keeps us updated on modern situations. The study of social phenomena and the ways and means of promoting what Giddens called social adequacy, is one of the most urgent needs of the modern society. Sociology has a strong appeal to all minds through its bearing upon many of the initial problems of the present world. Human culture has been made richer by sociology, because social phenomena are now understood in the light of scientific knowledge and enquiry. Sociology provides us the training to have rational approach, by comparative study of societies and groups other than our existence; culture has become richer, and fuller than it would have been.

In conclusion, the most significant relevance is that sociology brought science to the study of society, and lately the importance of sociology as the science of human relationship is being realised although the scientific study of the society and the promotion of human welfare has been neglected for long periods. As a matter of fact, the study of social phenomena and the promotion of human welfare are the most logical and reasonable subjects to be made scientific, and if the society is to make progress, then human and social welfare should be developed and of course the best approach is sociology.

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