

Societies

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how societies developed from primitive groups foraging for food, to farmers and shepherds, to city-dwellers and advanced economies. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Trajectory Of Societies

Hunting and gathering tribes, imperial Japan, suburban America—each is a society. But what does this mean? Exactly what is a society? In sociological terms, society refers to a group of people who live in a definable geographic space and share the same or similar culture.



HINT

Consider the cell phone example: phone (society), hardware (social institutions), and software (culture). Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1924-2015) defined societies in terms of their technological sophistication (1966). As a society advances, so does its use of technology, which is defined as the application of science to address the problems of daily life.

Societies with rudimentary technology depend on the fluctuations of their environments, while industrialized societies have more control over the impact of their surroundings and thus develop different cultural features. This distinction is so important that sociologists generally classify societies along a spectrum based on their degree of industrialization—from pre-industrial to industrial to post-industrial.



Problem Solving: Skill Reflect

If you've ever watched a group of talented musicians jamming together, you've seen how a common goal—making great music—can unite all different kinds of people. In fact, effective collaboration is the secret sauce of great performances and great accomplishments of any kind. Collaborating gives you extra ears, hands, and brains to work with. And by bringing people together to think, brainstorm, and offer diverse perspectives, you can utilize the knowledge, experience, and skills of everyone involved. Such group efforts lead to faster, better solutions; they're what makes a team, a company, or a society function and thrive. By studying societies, you'll strengthen your relationship building, problem solving, and self and social awareness skills by learning how collaborative approaches can be used to make decisions, alleviate conflict, and strengthen relationships across society.

2. Pre-Industrial Societies

Before the Industrial Revolution and the widespread use of machines, societies were small, rural, and dependent largely on local resources. Economic production was limited to the amount of labor a human being could provide, and there were few specialized occupations. The very first occupation was that of hunter-gatherer.

2a. Hunter-Gatherer

Hunter-gatherer societies demonstrate the strongest dependence on the environment of the various types of pre-industrial societies. As the basic structure of all human society until about 10,000-12,000 years ago, these groups were based around kinship or tribes. Hunter-gatherers relied on their surroundings for survival—they hunted wild animals and foraged for uncultivated plants for food. When resources became scarce, the group moved to a new area to find sustenance, meaning they were nomadic. These societies were common until several hundred years ago, but today only a few hundred remain in existence, such as the Mbuti who move seasonally between villages and the rainforest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hunter-gatherer groups are quickly disappearing as the world's population increases and fewer truly remote areas exist.

2b. Pastoral

Changing conditions and adaptations led some societies to rely on the domestication of animals where circumstances permitted. Roughly 7,500 years ago, human societies began to recognize their ability to tame and breed animals and to grow and cultivate their own plants. Pastoral societies, such as the Maasai villagers of East Africa, rely on the domestication of animals as a resource for survival. Unlike earlier hunter-gatherers who depended entirely on existing resources to stay alive, pastoral groups were able to breed livestock for food, clothing, and transportation, and they created a surplus of goods. Herding, or pastoral, societies remained nomadic because they were forced to follow their animals to fresh feeding grounds. Around the time that pastoral societies emerged, specialized occupations began to develop, and societies commenced trading with each other.

2c. Horticultural

Around the same time that pastoral societies were on the rise, another type of society developed, based on the newly developed capacity for people to grow and cultivate plants. Previously, the depletion of a region's crops or water supply forced pastoral societies to relocate in search of food sources for their livestock. Horticultural societies formed in areas where rainfall and other conditions allowed them to grow stable crops. They were similar to hunter-gatherers in that they largely depended on the environment for survival, but since they didn't have to abandon their location to follow resources, they were able to start permanent settlements. This created more stability and more material goods and became the basis for the first revolution in human survival.

2d. Agricultural

While pastoral and horticultural societies used small, temporary tools such as digging sticks or hoes, agricultural societies relied on permanent tools for survival. Around 10,000 B.C.E. an explosion of new technology known as the Agricultural Revolution made farming possible—and profitable. Farmers learned to rotate the types of crops grown on their fields and to reuse waste products as fertilizer, which led to better harvests and greater surpluses of food. New tools for digging and harvesting were made of metal, and this made them more effective and longer lasting. Human settlements grew into towns and cities, and particularly bountiful regions became networked centers of trade and commerce.

This is also the age in which people had the time and comfort to engage in more contemplative and thoughtful activities, such as music, poetry, and philosophy. This period came to be known as the “dawn of civilization” by some because of the increase of leisure time and the development of the humanities. Craftspeople were able to support themselves through the production of creative, decorative, or thought-provoking aesthetic objects and writings.

As resources became more plentiful, social classes became more divided. Those who had more resources could afford better standards of living and developed into a class of nobility. Differences in social standing between men and women increased. As cities expanded, ownership and preservation of resources became a pressing concern.

2e. Feudal

The ninth century gave rise to feudal societies in Europe. These societies contained a strict hierarchical system of power based on land ownership and protection. The nobility, known as lords, placed vassals in charge of pieces of land. In return for the resources that the land provided, vassals promised to fight for their lords.

These individual pieces of land, known as fiefdoms, were cultivated by the lower class. In return for maintaining the land, peasants were guaranteed a place to live and protection from outside enemies. Power was handed down through family lines, with peasant families serving lords, often across many generations. Ultimately, the social and economic system of feudalism failed and was replaced by the more non-centralized and entrepreneurial system of capitalism, enabled by the technological advances of the industrial era.

3. Industrial Society

Up to this point we have discussed these stages of societies' development as universal stages. We will now move to speaking specifically of the industrial development of Europe. Industrialization in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions followed a different timeline and trajectory.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, Europe experienced a dramatic rise in technological invention, ushering in an era known as the Industrial Revolution. What made this period remarkable was the number of new inventions that influenced people's daily lives. Within a generation, tasks that had until this point required months of labor became achievable in a matter of days.

Before the Industrial Revolution, work was largely person or animal-based, and relied on human workers or horses to power mills and drive pumps. In 1782, James Watt and Matthew Boulton created a steam engine that could effectively do the work of twelve horses.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Steam power began appearing everywhere. Instead of paying artisans to painstakingly spin wool and weave it into cloth, people turned to textile mills that produced fabric quickly at a better price and often with better quality. Rather than planting and harvesting fields by hand, farmers were able to purchase mechanical seeders and threshing machines that caused agricultural productivity to soar. Products such as paper and glass became available to the average person, and the quality and accessibility of education and health care soared. Gas lights allowed increased visibility in the dark, and towns and cities developed both a nightlife and greater economic productivity.

One of the results of increased productivity and technology was the rise of 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. People wanted their children and their children's children to continue to rise, and as capitalism expanded, so too did social mobility.

It was during this time that power moved from the hands of the aristocracy and “old money” to business-savvy newcomers who amassed fortunes in their lifetimes. Powerful industrial families like the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts became the new elites and used their influence in business to influence government and culture as well. Eventually, concerns over the exploitation of workers led to the formation of labor unions and consequently to laws that set mandatory minimum working conditions for employees. Although the introduction of new technology at the end of the nineteenth century ended the industrial age, much of our social structure and many of our social ideas—like family, childhood, and time standardization—have a basis in industrial society.

3a. Post-Industrial Society

Information societies, sometimes known as postindustrial or digital societies, are a 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.

Digital technology is the steam engine of information societies, and computer moguls such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are its Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. 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 likely to be employed as 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 to achieve success.

4. Durkheim on the Trajectory of Societies

As a functionalist, Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) perspective on society stressed the necessary interconnectivity of all of its elements. To him, society was greater than the sum of its parts. He asserted that individual behavior was not the same as collective behavior and that studying collective behavior was quite different from studying an individual's actions. Durkheim called the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of society the **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.” This is what we know as peer pressure, and is an illustrative example of how something that seems like common sense can be studied empirically.

Following the ideas of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, Durkheim likened society to that of a living organism, in which each organism plays a necessary role in keeping the being alive (1933). Durkheim asserted that members of societies who violate social norms are necessary to the well-being of society because punishment for deviance affirms the collective conscience. “A crime is a crime because we condemn it,” Durkheim wrote in 1893. “An act offends the common consciousness not because it is criminal, but it is criminal because it offends that consciousness.” Durkheim's unique perspective on crime provides one example of societal elements that are social facts, or social forces, that were to be considered real in their effects and which existed beyond the individual.

As an observer of his social world, Durkheim was not entirely satisfied with the direction of society in his day. His primary concern was that the cultural glue that held society together was failing, and people were

becoming more divided. In his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933), Durkheim argued that as society grew more complex, social order made the transition from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity.

Pre-industrial societies, Durkheim explained, were held together by **mechanical solidarity**, a type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture. Societies with mechanical solidarity act in an automatic fashion; things are done mostly because they have always been done that way. This type of thinking was common in pre-industrial societies, where strong bonds of kinship and a low division and differentiation of labor created shared morals and values among people, such as those in hunter-gatherer groups. When people tend to do the same type of work, Durkheim argued, they tend to think and act alike. Here we see that labor and communal self-preservation are fundamental.

In industrial societies, mechanical solidarity is replaced with **organic solidarity**, which is social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences. In capitalist societies, Durkheim wrote, 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. Laws exist as formalized morals and are based on restitution and justice rather than revenge.

While the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is, in the long run, advantageous for a society, Durkheim noted that it can be a time of chaos and “normlessness.” One of the outcomes of the transition is something he called social anomie. **Anomie**—literally, “without law”—is a situation in which society no longer has the support of a firm collective consciousness, and wherein established norms are weakened. People, though more necessarily interdependent as they attempt to solve complex problems in these advanced societies, are also more alienated from each other. Anomie is experienced in times of social uncertainty, such as during war or amidst a great upturn or downturn in the economy. As societies reach an advanced stage of organic solidarity, they avoid anomie by reestablishing an adapted set of shared norms. According to Durkheim, once a society achieves organic solidarity, it has finished its development.



THINK ABOUT IT

How do you think anomie is experienced today? Can you think of moments that our society experienced anomie? How and where do we see anomic situations around the world? What factors precipitate these situations?



Relationship Building: Skill Reflect

Consider the benefits of having people with different skills, backgrounds, and perspectives working together in a society. Throughout the development of different types of societies, relationships have been built between individuals who are different from one another, but depend on each other for the benefit of society. For instance, our current society relies on farmers as well as engineers. How have societies built relationship skills throughout history, and how has this improved culture and quality of life?



TERMS TO KNOW

Collective Conscience

Durkheim's term for the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of society.

Mechanical Solidarity

According to Durkheim, a type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture.

Organic Solidarity

According to Durkheim, a social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences.

Anomie

When a society no longer has the support of a firm collective consciousness, and wherein established norms are weakened.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **trajectory of societies** which progressed via technology from **pre-industrial societies** into **industrial societies** and beyond. You learned about **Durkheim on the trajectory of societies** and his theories of mechanical and organic solidarity, and how the technological advancement of a society affects how people relate to one another within it.

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