

England's 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor

England's 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor marked the beginning of the modern development of social welfare. The Act established secular (non-church) responsibility for the care of the needy by making local governments (called parishes) responsible for their own poor. Although poorhouses, workhouses and almshouses were all established, terrible conditions at these institutions discouraged all but the truly destitute from seeking relief. Nevertheless, the Act is an important milestone in the history of social welfare and the excerpt below offers an interesting comparison to England's earlier Ordinance of Laborers of 1349.

Be it enacted by the Authority of this present Parliament, That the Churchwardens of every Parish, and four, three or two substantial Housholders there, as shall be thought meet . . . shall take order from Time to Time, by, and with the Consent of two or more such Justices of Peace as is aforesaid, for setting to work the Children of all such whose Parents shall not by the said Churchwardens and Overseers, or the greater Part of them be thought able to keep and maintain their Children: And also for setting to work all such Persons, married or unmarried, having no Means to maintain them, and use no ordinary and daily Trade of Life to get their Living by: And also to raise weekly or otherwise (by Taxation of every Inhabitant, Parson, Vicar and other, and of every Occupier of Lands, Houses, Tithes impropriate, Propriations of Tithes, Coal-Mines, or saleable Underwoods in the said Parish, in such competent Sum and Sums of Money as they shall think fit) a convenient Stock of Flax, Hemp, Wool, Thread,

Iron, and other necessary Ware and Stuff, to set the Poor on Work: And also competent Sums of Money for and towards the necessary Relief of the Lamé, Impotent, Old, Blind, and such other among them being Poor, and not able to work, and also for the putting out of such Children to be apprentices, to be gathered out of the same Parish, according to the Ability of the same Parish, and to do and execute all other Things as well for the disposing of the said Stock, as otherwise concerning the Premises, as to them shall seem convenient.

...

And be it also enacted, That if the said Justices of Peace do perceive, that the Inhabitants of any Parish are not able to levy among themselves sufficient Sums of Money for the Purposes aforesaid; That then the said two Justices shall and may tax, rate and assess, as aforesaid, any other of other Parishes, or out of any Parish, within the Hundred where the said Parish is, to pay such Sum and Sums of Money to the Churchwardens and Overseers of the said poor Parish, for the said Purposes, as the said Justices shall think fit, according to the Intent of this Law: And if the said Hundred shall not be thought to the said Justices able and fit to relieve the said several Parishes not able to provide for themselves as aforesaid; then the Justices of Peace, at their General Quarter-Sessions, or the greater Number them, shall rate, and assess as aforesaid, any other of other Parishes, or out of any Parish within the said County, for the Purposes aforesaid, as in their Discretion shall seem fit.

Source: *England's 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor*. Retrieved from <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~peter/workhouse/poorlaws/1601frames.html>

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Sociology

Had sociology stayed true to its origins, it would be more central to the study of world history than it now is.

Like most bold statements, that one needs to be immediately qualified. It is rarely possible to pinpoint, chronologically or geographically, the absolute beginnings of a

*The only thing you will ever be able to say
in the so-called 'social' sciences is: "some do,
some don't."* • THROOP III, KELVIN
(20TH CENTURY)

broad intellectual tradition. Geographically, it has to be recognized that there were, and are, many different national sociological traditions, and concerns with history—let alone world history—have not been central to all of them. Chronologically, a key insight in comparative history and sociology—the analogy between the interconnected institutions of a society and the interconnected parts of a living organism—can be traced back as far as Aristotle's *Politics*. Sociologists are also fond of tracing their ancestry back to Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah* of about 1380 (1958); often described as a "philosophy of history," it is also one of the earliest discussions of the possibility of a social science and of long-term social change in world history, and it introduced concepts of undoubted sociological significance, such as *social cohesion*.

Precursors

Nevertheless, the emancipation of sociology from the shackles of political and moral philosophy that it shared with so many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences is usually seen as beginning in the French and Scottish Enlightenments and gaining momentum through evolutionary thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through a study of history since classical times, in his *De l'esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws), first published in 1748 (1949), Montesquieu distinguished between three forms of government—republics, monarchies and despotisms—less on the basis of who exercised power and still less on their respective moral qualities, and more according to *how* it was exercised and *why* each form arose to fit societies of different kinds. Other precursors of a historically orientated sociology include Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) and the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794). Ferguson stressed the interdependence of people with each other in societies, and in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) he traced humanity's progression from "savagery" to the "refinement" of "civil society" (an idea that returned to great prominence in the late twentieth century, especially in connection with the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe). Condorcet's

Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain (Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, 1955 [1795]) similarly traced the entire progress of human society through a series of ten stages from "savagery"—when humans were little better than the animals—to a vision of an egalitarian and enlightened future. Ferguson and Condorcet's visions of uninterrupted human progress set a pattern for many nineteenth-century theories of social evolution, in which human societies traveled from savagery through barbarism to civilization.

Auguste Comte— The Law of Three Stages

Montesquieu, Ferguson, and Condorcet were only "precursors" of sociology, however, in at least a literal sense, since the word *sociology* had not yet been invented. The dubious honor of coining the term belongs to Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Perhaps more clearly than anyone before (unless it were Ibn Khaldūn), Comte was concerned with the possibility of a *social science*, the systematic study of society and the accumulated knowledge resulting from it that would help to guide and improve social development. He called this science "sociology." At that time the modern division of the social sciences into many institutionally distinct disciplines—anthropology, archaeology, economics, political science, psychology, as well as sociology *per se*—had not yet come about, so it must be understood that by sociology Comte meant the social sciences at large, including the study of world history. He advanced a "law of three stages," but it was not about savagery–barbarism–civilization; it was rather about three stages in the development of human knowledge. At each stage a different general principle predominated in the ways in which human beings sought explanations of the natural and social world that they inhabited. During a long *theological* stage, explanations were offered in terms of gods and spirits. There had followed a *metaphysical* stage, when explanations were offered in terms of abstractions such as "reason"; this transitional phase was fairly clearly modeled on Renaissance and Enlightenment thought in Europe. Finally, the



modern world was witnessing the emergence of a *positive* or *scientific* stage; in the early nineteenth century the word *positif* was nearly a synonym in French for “scientific.” Comte used it to signify the rejection of the speculative philosophy of the past, which had so often advanced propositions in forms incapable of being tested against observable facts. But Comte, the founder of philosophical positivism, was by no means a positivist in the sense that was later caricatured as “crude positivism.” He did not believe that scientific knowledge could be based on observation alone; observation had to be guided by theoretical ideas, but theories had to be modifiable in the light of observation. The corpus of knowledge grew through the interplay of the two mental operations directed at theoretical synthesis and at the observation of empirical particulars. The law of three stages was linked to Comte’s notion of a “hierarchy of the sciences.” Looking at the history of the main areas of knowledge, he contended that the positive or scientific stage had been reached first in mathematics (which at that date was mistakenly believed to be an empirical discipline), then by astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology; topmost in the hierarchy and last in development came the new discipline of sociology. The areas of knowledge higher in the hierarchy could not be *reduced* to the lower but represented a higher level of synthesis, the attainment of the scientific stage at lower levels being preconditions for the emergence of the higher. Astronomy had in Comte’s view entered the scientific stage in antiquity; physics and chemistry had been placed on a scientific footing much more recently; the biological sciences were undergoing rapid development in his own lifetime. Each advance up the hierarchy of the sciences represented an increase not only in humankind’s understanding of, but also in its control over, first physical, then organic, and finally social forces. In industrial society, when sociology had attained the scientific stage, social affairs would be studied and then regulated scientifically. Comte encapsulated this idea in his slogan *savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir* (know in order to foresee, foresee in order to be able [to act]). These central ideas of Comte’s—despite there being a fairly high proportion of nonsense

in his voluminous writings—contain a valid kernel that is still relevant to understanding world history.

Comte’s influence was especially marked on the work of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who combined it with newly prevalent evolutionary ideas to produce an ambitious comparative-historical taxonomy of the forms of human society. His influence was in turn strongly felt in the development of sociology in the United States (for example, through William Graham Sumner, 1840–1910) and (with Comte) in the work of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). In the student textbooks, Durkheim, Karl Marx (1818–83), and Max Weber (1864–1920) are now often depicted as the three founders of the modern discipline of sociology (a curiously unsociological view that diminishes the extent to which they all stood on the shoulders of giants). Yet all three continued their precursors’ central concern with understanding the long-term development of human society, so it is paradoxical that in the science they are supposed to have founded this concern became steadily less important as the twentieth century ran its course. The decades after the World War II saw the spread of what has variously been called “developmental agnosticism” (Wittfogel 1957), “hodiecentrism” (Goudsblom 1977) and the retreat of sociologists into the present (Elias 1987). This tendency may in part be the outcome of the sociological profession’s wish to measure its achievements against the utilitarian yardstick of usefulness in rectifying the ills of contemporary society. It also had deeper intellectual roots.

The Retreat into the Present

The fact that in the Victorian age, and perhaps for some decades in the early twentieth century, there was a widespread and uncritical assumption that the new “civilized” industrial societies were *superior* to other ways of life—especially those that Europeans encountered in their colonies and Americans in the course of their westward expansion—led to an equally uncritical and comprehensive rejection by sociologists (and even more strongly by anthropologists) not just of the idea of progress, but of all study of processes and stages of long-term social



development. The genocides of the Nazi era served as the most awful warning of the dangers of regarding categories of human beings as superior and inferior; Sir Karl Popper (1945, 1957) and Robert Nisbet (1969) forged intellectual links between political tyranny and the pursuit of “inexorable laws of historical destiny,” which helped for a while to make developmental perspectives almost taboo for many sociologists.

The retreat into the present had, however, begun earlier. The rise after the World War I of the approach within anthropology known as ‘functionalism’, associated especially with Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, had a strong but markedly delayed impact on sociology. Functionalism involved studying societies as systems of well-meshing “parts” at a given point in time. It was at the peak of functionalism’s influence in sociology during the two decades after the World War II that Talcott Parsons (1902–79) dominated American sociology, and American sociology dominated the world. In anthropology functionalism had begun as a methodological rule of thumb in field work: It was a reaction against the tendency of Victorian evolutionary anthropologists to resort to “conjectural history” in seeking to explain the customs of preliterate societies, when for the most part any firm evidence about the past of such societies was lacking. Seeking synchronic relationships between patterns that could actually be observed in the field made better sense for anthropologists than speculating about their origins in past time. Why the same ahistorical approach should have had such appeal to sociologists studying societies blessed with abundant written records of their own past development gives more pause for thought. Although functionalism was in retreat in sociology by the late 1960s, developmental agnosticism was then reinforced through the influence of French structuralism, which had drawn its original inspiration from the shift in linguistics from diachronic to synchronic investigations led by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). The same cast of mind can be seen in the so-called poststructuralist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and even casts a shadow on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002),

leading French intellectuals who have attracted numerous followers in sociology across the world. Foucault presents a particularly relevant paradox: He appears on the surface to be studying processes of historical change, but on closer scrutiny he can be seen to depict the dominance of static “discourses” that are mysteriously supplanted through unexplained historical *ruptures* into new dominant discourses.

Historical Sociology

By the end of the twentieth century, there was a definite revival of historical concerns among sociologists, although historical sociology was now generally seen as one among many minority interests or subdisciplines—rather than the central preoccupation that it was for many of the discipline’s founders. An interest in world history, or in very long-term processes of social change, is however the province of a minority of a minority, among sociologists as among historians. (In this field it is, furthermore, sometimes difficult to distinguish between historically minded sociologists and sociologically minded historians.) A useful distinction can be drawn between two types of historical sociology. The first may be called simply the *sociology of the past*. In this kind of research, sociological concepts and theories are used to investigate groups of people living in some specific period in the past. This kind of research does not differ fundamentally from research into groups of people living in the present: It is merely that documents form a larger part of the evidence than they would generally do in research into the present, for the very practical reason that dead people cannot fill in questionnaires or respond to interviewers. As against this sociology of the past, other sociologists seek to discern and explain longer-term *structured processes* of development.

The distinction is not hard and fast. For example, Norbert Elias’s *The Court Society* (1983)—among his works the most widely admired by historians—deals with a relatively closely defined place and period (France and its royal court in the century before the French Revolution), but his underlying concern is with more general processes of development. Still less is the distinction one

of academic worth. Many of the finest examples of historical sociology are instances of the sociology of the past. To put it perhaps oversimply, their impulse is comparative rather than developmental.

The scale on which comparison is pursued or invited varies enormously. At one end of the scale, two widely admired books may be mentioned: Kai T. Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* (1966) and Leonore Davidoff's *The Best Circles* (1973), studies respectively of deviance in colonial New England and of behavior in nineteenth-century London high society. They are excellent examples of the sociology of the past. Their value, however, is not dependent on the fact that they are studies of the *past*: They are in effect contributions to the understanding of deviant behavior and of endogamous status groups irrespective of time. The arrow of time may also be reversed for comparative purposes: A present-day study may prove stimulating when studying the past. For example, Stan Cohen's modern classic, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972)—a study of battles between rival groups of motorcyclists and motor-scooter riders in Britain and of the public reaction to them—might usefully be read by historians laboring at the large body of research on witch crazes in the past.

Other examples of the sociology of the past, but on a more macrosociological scale, are studies like Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). They explicitly set out to study comparable episodes at different periods in different societies. Taking a small number of episodes, they attempt to generalize to similar situations, past, present, and future. Yet they do not advance any theory of social development over the longer term.

The minority of the minority are those sociologists whose interest centers on the construction of modes of long-term developmental processes. They include notably Immanuel Wallerstein, whose *The Modern World-System* (1974, 1980, 1989) is in effect a massive attempt at an historical disproof of David Ricardo's apparently timeless "law of comparative advantage," showing how initially small inequalities in ties of interdependence between societies and economies have been magnified over time

to produce massive differences today between what are euphemistically called the "North" and the "South." Another example is that of Norbert Elias, whose massive *The Civilising Process* (2000 [1939]) advances a theory of state formation based on a study of Western Europe during the second millennium AD and links that to changes in the psychological makeup (or *habitus*) undergone by individuals as they become gradually more subject in the course of generations to the social constraint imposed by the monopolization of the means of violence by the state apparatus. Charles Tilly's work has also centered on state formation processes. Abram de Swaan's *In Care of the State* (1988) shows how the development of compulsory education, income maintenance, and public health policies followed a similar sequence over 500 years in Britain, Germany, France, the United States, and the Netherlands, because a process of the collectivization of risk overrode very different ideological assumptions in the various countries. Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* (1986, 1993) traces the changing relationship between economic, ideological, military, and political bases of power over the entire course of human history. Finally, it should be recognized that Marxist scholars kept alive the sociological interest in long-term processes of change when they were least fashionable. Perry Anderson's *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974a) and *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974b) are classics of that tradition.

In conclusion it should be mentioned that—perhaps in response to the hodiecentric mood that prevailed in their discipline for several decades—historical sociologists have shown considerable methodological self-awareness. Notable contributions in this area are Charles Tilly's *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (1984); the extensive debate about the relevance of rational choice theory in historical sociology (Coleman and Fararo 1992); and that about the entire "scientific" basis of historical sociology provoked by Goldthorpe (1991, 1994; cf. Hart 1994, Mann 1994).

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See also Social Sciences

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Socrates

(c. 470–399 BCE)

ATHENIAN PHILOSOPHER AND PROVOCATIVE
TEACHER

Socrates was born just at the time that Athens was beginning to experience empire; he grew as the Athenian empire was growing; he survived the long and fratricidal war with Sparta, which destroyed Athenian power; he witnessed Athens's ultimate defeat; he was slain by a new democracy seeking to reestablish itself out of the ashes of the old.

For much of that time, he had acted as a teacher to the wealthy young men of the city, although without taking payment. He taught within a tradition of traveling thinkers and lecturers (Sophists), whose speculations about and interrogations of the natural world represented a genuine attempt to understand the structure and order of things. The style of these Sophists was deductive rather than experimental, and their consuming interest was the description of reality. Such men made their living as itinerant teachers and their reputation suffered principally because they had either to teach for pay or to accept the support of a wealthy patron.

While Socrates, superficially at least, belonged in this tradition, he was neither itinerant (he lived his life in Athens) nor did he accept pay (despite apparent poverty). Furthermore, he was less interested in seeking to describe the natural world as he was in probing the authenticity of knowledge, and exemplifying and seeking moral integrity. Moreover, he did not teach through exposition, but through relentless questioning of his subject. To Socrates, philosophy was, essentially, a conversation rather than a lecture.

For some decades, Socrates had lived a more or less conventional life. An Athenian citizen, he was wealthy enough to serve as hoplite in the Athenian army (the heavily armored hoplites provided all of their own equipment). As a warrior, he had distinguished himself in battle, serving with distinction in three bloody engagements during the Peloponnesian War: Potidaea,