

What is Sociology?



How far are the theoretical approaches of sociology's founders still relevant today?

This question focuses on continuity and change in the nature of the discipline, comparing the nineteenth-century origin of sociology with contemporary societies. Your task therefore is to decide whether the classical theoretical approaches discussed in this chapter (and in the first part of Chapter 3) can continue to address the pressing social problems of twenty-first-century societies.



The initial temptation, and one to avoid wherever possible, is to outline a potted history of sociological theory, or even of the discipline as a whole. This is unwise because (a) there is too much material in the text to be able to cover it adequately and (b) in any case it is likely to attract the comment 'over-descriptive' from the person who marks it. Instead, you need to think thematically and use the material in the text to illustrate your points.

A good strategy would be to speed-read the chapter and write down three key elements of each classical thinker's work. This then allows you to cross-reference your keywords and try to establish what were the key or central problems that the classical theorists sought to investigate. Don't feel you have to be comprehensive in a short essay. Feel free to argue by example. Choose a figure from the nineteenth century and show how their ideas helped to shape the discipline into the twentieth century and beyond. This might be in terms of the concepts they formulated (class, bureaucracy), the methods they deployed (the case study, statistics) or simply the subject matter they studied (religions, social inequality, suicide).

A more thematic approach might focus on ideas or debates rather than individuals. In what ways has the discipline changed in terms of its central concerns? How are these related to the emergence of new social problems and issues? This might involve reading more widely around the book to identify topics that seem novel or make few references to sociology's founders (for example, Chapter 5 - Environment or Chapter 14 – Sexuality and Gender).

Another angle would be to approach the question in reverse, by first looking at the present state of the discipline and seeing what, if anything, it owes to the nineteenth century. The section on theoretical dilemmas in Chapter 3 might be useful in this regard. The obvious choice here would be 'the problem of the environment' in so far as it is a recent feature of sociological theorizing. A far more challenging task would be to look for ways in which the classical sociologists' work *did* contain ways of theorizing society-environment relations, even if these were implicit in the original work. This could be done in two ways. One way would be to point to the work of, say, Marx and Engels on human beings, nature and alienation, which has stimulated more recent work in environmental sociology on the 'treadmill of production'. Another strategy would be to show how many well-established sociological concepts could be applied to the analysis of environmental issues.



Of course, the key question is just *how far* such classical theoretical approaches can be used to study contemporary issues and your essay will need to make its own assessment of this. In doing so, it will be important for a balanced essay to note which contemporary issues and social problems may demand genuinely new ways of thinking that go beyond or are outside of the theoretical frameworks of the classics.