

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13459-0 - Methods of Social Study
Sidney and Beatrice Webb
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

THE PROVINCE OF SOCIOLOGY DETERMINED

IF this were a book on the methods of chemical study it would not be necessary to begin with a chapter on the province of the science of chemistry. But social science or sociology¹ is neither so clearly marked off as chemistry from other branches of knowledge, nor is its scope so uniformly understood by all sorts and conditions of men. A loose and indefinite impression as to the exact sphere of social science may not interfere with our learning all that the citizen needs to know about the constitution and functions of the various social institutions amid which we live. If, however, our object is to make new discoveries in social science, that is, to extend in this sphere the boundaries of knowledge—if, moreover, we desire to make the best use of the instruments of investigation and research that are open to us—it is important, at the outset, to clear up our ideas as to the province of

¹ “The word sociology first appeared in print in its French form ‘sociologie’ in the fourth volume of Auguste Comte’s *Positive Philosophy*, the first edition of which was published in 1839. . . . Although the word sociology is derived from both Latin and Greek, still it is fully justified, by the absence in the Greek language of the most essential component.” (*Outlines of Sociology*, by Lester F. Ward, 1898, pp. 3, 4.)

2 METHODS OF SOCIAL STUDY

the science on which our attention is to be concentrated.

Science, in any definition, means knowledge of the universe, or of some part of it. Those who apply themselves to social science or sociology seek knowledge about a particular part of the universe, that is to say, the various human groupings that we find existing all round the world. Human society, in fact, is made up of these groupings of men, from the family up to the nation, or even the world-wide League of Nations; from a college debating society up to the Roman Catholic Church; from the blacksmith fashioning the ironwork for the village up to the international steel cartel operating in conjunction with the loosely associated bankers of the world.¹

Sociology accordingly belongs, like botany and zoology, physiology and psychology, to what may

¹ The facts relating to human groupings, it has been said, "fall into two great classes, (a) social relations proper—the actual interrelations of wills—and (b) social institutions, which are not actual interrelations of wills, but the determinate (and therefore willed) forms in accordance with which men enter into social relations. . . . Social relations are activities, the threads of life; social institutions form the loom on which the threads are woven into a cloth." (*Community: a Sociological Study*, by R. R. Maciver, 1917, p. 7.)

"Using this term in a broad sense, institutions embrace language, customs, governments, religions, industries, and ultimately art and literature." (*Outlines of Sociology*, by Lester F. Ward, 1898, p. 123.)

"We may define an institution as collective action in control, liberation and expansion of individual action. Collective action ranges all the way from unorganised custom to the many organised going concerns, such as the family, the corporation, the trade association, the trade union, the reserve system, the state. The principle common to them all is greater or less control, liberation and expansion of individual action by collective action." ("Institutional Economics", by John R. Commons, in *American Economic Review*, December 1931, p. 650.)

PROVINCE OF SOCIOLOGY DETERMINED 3

be termed the biological group of sciences, as distinguished from the group of physical sciences, which includes astronomy and mechanics, physics and chemistry. The distinction between these two groups of sciences is, as we shall see, all-important in the consideration of their several methods and their instruments of investigation, discovery, and verification.

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF SOCIOLOGY

Like physiology and psychology, sociology has to do with human beings. But unlike physiology and psychology, sociology is concerned not with the individual man, regarded as a living organism having body and mind, but with the relations among men. These relations are manifested (as in vernacular speech and the family) in human society in its most primitive forms, and they extend to all its stages of development. Accordingly their study involves the observation of the behaviour of individual men in their innumerable varieties of association among themselves, including the study of anything else in so far as it has any part in the formation of human groups, or in their endless modifications.

We have said that the sociologist is concerned not only with the relations between men in association, and with the human groupings in which these relations are manifested, but also with everything that helps to create or modify those relations and groupings of men. These influential factors are manifold.

4 METHODS OF SOCIAL STUDY

There are the influences upon each population of the physical geography amid which it lives; of the climate and the weather; of the fauna and flora; of the social heritage of race and language, religion and custom; of traditions as to history, national and local, and, by no means least in its effects, of both the past and the contemporaneous economic framework of the community. All this may be regarded as forming a sort of social atmosphere in which every man grows up, and in which, all unconscious of its weight, he lives and moves, and his contemporaneous social institutions have their being. Changing the metaphor, we may say that all these influences, contributing to make up the particular civilisation or “Kultur”¹ of each community, form, as it were, the matrix in which all its social institutions are embedded. Affecting all the institutions of each generation, this social matrix is itself perpetually influenced by them—the whole creating and maintaining a constantly changing *milieu* against which individuals may react and even rebel, but from the influence of which no one can escape.

Into this social atmosphere, with momentous and almost incalculable effects on the behaviour of men in their various groupings, we see entering successive waves of thoughts and feelings, which spread over entire communities, and, with increasing inter-communication, increasingly over the whole world.

¹ The German expression “Kultur” (which does not mean “culture”, the German for which is *Bildung*) is best translated by “particular civilisation”, not civilisation in general.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13459-0 - Methods of Social Study
Sidney and Beatrice Webb
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PROVINCE OF SOCIOLOGY DETERMINED 5

Outstanding examples of such waves are afforded by the great world religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Further instances are the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome; and more than a thousand years later, the liberation of the spirit in what we know as the Renaissance and the Reformation. Sociologists do not always recognise that the stream of ideas disseminated to the ends of the earth by the past couple of centuries of scientific discovery, notably in physics and biology, represent influences on human society quite analogous to the foregoing. Even more important may be the lives of men of exceptional greatness whether in mental power or moral genius, in thought or in action, in literature or in war, which may even, quite unpredictably, overturn one society and create another. William James spoke of such men as social ferments, possibly exercising, without even being conscious of it, entirely disproportionate effects on the society of their time. For our present purpose it is needless to consider how far it is the idea, how far the emotion, and how far the power of personality.¹ All such influences, not in and for themselves, but only in so far as they create or modify social relations, or the institutions into which these relations are woven, fall necessarily within the province of sociology.

In one of his stimulating lectures at the London School of Economics, Sir Halford Mackinder, then its Director, summed up in a vivid way the spheres

¹ *Psychology and Politics*, by W. H. R. Rivers, 1923, pp. 51-2.

of the several sciences by an imaginative vision of the earth on which we live. To the astronomer the earth, with all that is in it or upon it, is only an “oblate spheroid” spinning in the void of space, merely one of the “heavenly bodies”, all of which have to be studied in their shapes and sizes and “proper motions” and in their relations to one another. To other scientists the sphere of exploration is the earth’s crust and all that is in it or upon it, so far as our means of knowing extend. Let us regard the earth as an onion, made up of a series of coats. Think away all except the solid crust itself (the lithosphere), and you have left the special subject-matter of geology (including geography, petrology, mineralogy, crystallography, etc.). Ignore the solid ground, and concentrate attention on the waters that envelop the earth (the hydrosphere), often penetrating far into the solid crust, and mixing upward with the air; this is the subject-matter of oceanography or hydraulics. But there is another envelope (the atmosphere), about which we are steadily acquiring knowledge; this envelope, intermixing with both earth and water, is the subject-matter of meteorology. Leave out of your mental vision both the solid crust and its two fluid envelopes, and fix your attention entirely on the swarms of living organisms that inhabit them (the biosphere); this is the subject-matter of biology, which may be divided, if desired, not only into bacteriology, botany, and zoology, but also into a fourth specialisation called psychology. We carry this vision two

PROVINCE OF SOCIOLOGY DETERMINED 7

stages further than Sir Halford Mackinder needed for his purpose to do. There are yet other fields of exploration. Think away successively lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere; and contemplate the network of waves or oscillations, or whatever they may be found to be, that give us the experiences of heat, light, magnetism, electricity, and radio-activity in the limitless medium that we used to postulate as the ether. This field of force surrounding our globe may seem too immaterial to be thought of, even by analogy, as a coat of the onion. But as a distinct part of the universe it falls to be studied as physics. And there is yet another envelope, no less immaterial than the sphere of physics, which presents to us phenomena different from those of the lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere, and equally outside those studied by the physicist. Imagine only, as a sort of tenuous film, the web of patterns formed by the social organisations that exist all round the habitable globe. The supreme importance to ourselves of these social organisations, justifies, as we shall see, such a concentration of attention; whilst the immense variety and distinctive character of their attributes, disregarded alike by the biologist and by the psychologist, supplies, as every investigator discovers, an immeasurable field for exploration, in which the scientific world stands to-day only at the edge. This part of the universe, this particular coat of the onion—the web of social organisations, which we may visualise as surrounding the habitable globe, and for which, according to

8 METHODS OF SOCIAL STUDY

the latest fashion, the term “politsphere”¹ might be invented—is the province of social science or sociology. Particular departments or branches of this study, not always usefully dealt with separately, or wisely parcelled out, have been given special names, such as anthropology, history, linguistics or philology, jurisprudence, economics, political science, and ethics.²

There is another way of parcelling out the sciences, which may, if only by way of contrast, help us to fix the position that sociology occupies among its sister sciences. A favourite classification used to be one based upon the particular form of force to

¹ “Sociosphere” has been suggested by Professor J. A. Thomson (*The Control of Life*, 1921, p. 224.)

² We may recall the fact that, just sixty years ago, it was the ocean, the earth’s watery envelope, the particular “coat of the onion” that we have termed the hydrosphere, that seemed, to the scientific world, the part of the universe that was least known, and at that time had been the least explored. In response to the appeal thus made, for the removal of the ignorance that was deemed a reproach to British science in particular (for did not Britannia rule the waves?), the British Government of the day authorised the equipment of the Challenger Expedition to explore with the utmost thoroughness the entire length and breadth and depth of the world’s oceans and all that they contained—a huge investigation on which, from first to last, something like a million pounds was spent, with the gain of a great increase of the world’s knowledge. (See *The Cruise of H.M.S. Challenger*, by W. J. J. Spry, 1878; *Report on the Scientific Results of the Voyage of H.M.S. Challenger*, by Sir C. W. Thompson, 42 vols., 1881–95.)

To-day, it might be suggested, the part of the universe which is least known to science, and which has been least explored, is the outermost envelope of all, the web of patterns constituting the social institutions of humanity. Unfortunately no appeal for the systematic exploration of this part of the universe is made by the scientists of this or any other country; and no government is sufficiently enlightened to equip an investigating expedition corresponding to that of H.M.S. *Challenger*. We are inclined to say that a millionaire might usefully set aside a quarter of his fortune for the organisation and execution of just such a complete and systematic exploration of the social institutions of the world, or of the English-speaking world, or at any rate of his own country.

PROVINCE OF SOCIOLOGY DETERMINED 9

which each of the sciences is devoted. We may begin with the still mysterious attraction exercised by matter upon matter—that is to say, gravitation, which, in all its manifestations, and in relation to all kinds of material objects, together with all other forms of force causing the phenomenon of motion among these masses, whether celestial (astronomy) or terrestrial (mechanics). This is the subject-matter of two of the world's oldest sciences. Or we may study, not the relations between masses, but the relations of the molecules (or perhaps it may be oscillations or waves) among themselves—the great and ever-growing province of physics, whether our attention is concentrated on light, heat, magnetism, electricity, or radio-activity. The province of physics seems to-day to become steadily more closely connected with that of chemistry, which is the study of chemical action, or the phenomena manifested by the various substances, whether elements, compounds, or conglomerates, in their action and reaction on each other. All the sciences in this group, whether astronomy or mechanics, physics or chemistry, have much in common. They are alike essentially quantitative. They are concerned with units of considerable stability assumed to be identical one with another; units which lend themselves to exact measurement, and are therefore fully open to mathematical expression and treatment.¹ Those who devote themselves to one

¹ This is the main line of cleavage made by Poincaré: "It is therefore thanks to the approximate homogeneity of the matter studied by physicists that mathematical physics came into existence. In the natural sciences the following conditions are no longer to be found: homogeneity,

or all of these sciences are apt to think of them, and of their characteristics, as typical of everything that can be properly called science. But for many years even the most bigoted students of astronomy, mechanics, physics, and chemistry have admitted, as a science, the study that concerns itself with living organisms. These manifest one quite distinct characteristic—that of life—which, whether or not we regard it merely as a form of energy, and whether or not any intermediate forms may yet be discovered, clearly distinguishes this part of the universe from the spheres of astronomy or mechanics, physics or chemistry. The living organisms, though subject to gravitation, molecular activities, and chemical action, as are pieces of non-living matter, are yet, in the main, essentially different from non-living matter. “A living thing”, as H. G. Wells reminds us, “moves about in response to an inner impulse . . . and not only does it move of itself, but it feeds . . . metabolism and spontaneous movement are the primary characteristics of living things . . . [they] display an impulse to reproduce themselves”.¹ The units are not absolutely identical one with another, even within the same species; nor are they stable or unchanging even for a day. They are accordingly, as organisms, scarcely capable of complete measurement. It may be thought, indeed, that they manifest

relative independence of remote parts, simplicity of the elementary fact; and that is why the student of natural science is compelled to have recourse to other modes of generalisation.” (*Science and Hypothesis*, by H. Poincaré, 1905, p. 159.)

¹ *The Science of Life*, by H. G. Wells, 1931, p. 4.