



LECTURE NOTES

For Sociology S 111 Students
Induction to Sociology

By

Jason Mwanza, BA., MSoc.Sc PhD Research
Fellow UNZA

© Copy Right 2012

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The opinions expressed and conclusions drawn are those of the author's and the department's vision of Social Impact Assessment. The authors make no representation or warranty, expressed or implied, as to the completeness, correctness or utility of the information in this publication. However, this handbook is handy for use in the field. Whilst effort has been expended to ensure that the information contained herein is accurate, the author assumes no liability of any kind whatsoever resulting from the use or reliance upon the contents of this publication.

Important Guidelines for Printing and Photocopying

Limited permission is granted free of charge to print or photocopy all pages of this handout for educational, not-for-profit use by health, students or faculty. All copies must retain all author credits and copyright notices included in the original document. Under no circumstances is it permissible to sell or distribute on a commercial basis, or to claim authorship of, copies of material reproduced from this publication for this will be SIN.

All rights reserved. Except as expressly provided above, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission of the author.

This material is intended for educational use only by students and staff.

PREFACE

Sociology is a discipline that belongs to what conventionally is called the social science. The discipline is least regarded by students who come to the University of Zambia and this is because of myths and absolute ignorance by senior students who offer incorrect advice. Sociology in other universities is compulsory to economics, demography, law, political science, public administration, mass communication, agriculture and engineering students. Sociology is an anchor in the social sciences.

CHAPTER ONE-THE NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY

The term *sociology* literally means the science of society or human social life. This is stated so because the term itself in its direct sense denotes that. It is the study of human behaviour and social interaction. Because human social life is so expansive, sociology has many sub-sections of study, ranging from the analysis of conversations to the development of theories to try to understand how the entire world works. This chapter will introduce you to sociology and explain why it is important, how it can change your perspective of the world around you, and give a brief history of the discipline.

Origins of Sociology

A man does not step in the same river twice. By the time he steps into it the second time, it is not the same man and it is not the same river. Both the man and the river have changed.

The inference from this is that between the first and second instances, the man will have had different motives for stepping into the river and he may not get into the river at the same place or depth and the flow of the water may not be the same. What is the relevance of this quotation then? The social world is changing. Some argue it is growing; others say it is shrinking. The important point to grasp is: society does not remain unchanged over time. As will be discussed in more detail below, sociology has its roots in significant societal changes (e.g., the industrial revolution, the creation of empires, and the enlightenment of scientific reasoning). Early philosophers, sociologists and economists developed the discipline as an attempt to understand historical societal changes and they tried to use laws. As Karl Marx for example put it “Social relations, and thus change, are never completely of the present”. Marx famously expressed this idea as “People make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.” These circumstances include social relations, structures, material conditions, technology, etc. To fully understand a given society, it is necessary to place it within its historical and material context. This is what Auguste Comte before Karl Marx did.

Many philosophers, sociologists and economists have tried to single out the laws that clearly explain the succession of different social phases. They have tried to identify *evolutionary criteria* that would allow them to look back at changes that have already taken place, and foresee future changes. According to Saint-Simon a friend to Auguste Comté, a *law of progress* supports the *process* of evolution and this *progress* is not linear, since ‘organic periods’ of

progress necessarily alternate with 'critical periods' of temporary and partial regression.

Sociology as an academic discipline arose in the first half of 19th century (in 1837, to mention the exact year) as a special science dedicated to unravel the fundamental laws governing the societal phenomena and human social relationship with primary interest in analyzing the problems and societies of the modern, western world. It has, thus, conventionally been accepted to associate sociology with the study of the modern, industrialized societies of western world.

Comte (Comte 1875) used Saint Simon's thinking that postulated the development of any civilization. He borrowed from Saint Simon the thinking that follows the law of social progress which explains that individuals 'are subject to by invariable necessity': the 'law of the three phases or stages'. This law establishes that every society goes through 'theological, metaphysical and positive phases.' These phases follow a fixed and predetermined scheme. To appreciate the law, it is prudent to present the history of events in France that heralded the origins of sociology.

History of Positivism and the History of Science

Sociology as an academic science was thus born in 19th century (its formal establishment year being 1837) in Great Britain and Western Europe, especially in France and Germany, and it greatly advanced through out 19th and 20th centuries. Auguste Comte is the founder of the 'philosophy of positivism,' the disciplines of 'sociology' and the 'history of science. Auguste Comte had numerous sociological issues, questions and problems that had been raised and discussed by the forerunners starting from the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers' and Hebrew prophets' times (Rosenberg, 1987). These needed answers. In addition, the industrial revolution that took place in Europe began in Great Britain spread to France (see the popular French Political Revolution of 1789) coupled with the **Enlightenment** and advances in natural sciences and technology brought upheavals. These scientific innovations changed social relationships in society. These innovations and altered social relationships too needed explanations.

Living through several revolutions, monarchical regimes, republics, and empires, Comte rejected purely political and institutional reforms as ineffective to solve the social problems of the times. He saw social disorder in society which was brought about by the changes in the means of production. He saw social harmony and individualism and a lot of conflict. Instead, he argued for a science that could bring about social harmony. He further argued that this could only occur if individuals were brought together by a consensus that was both intellectual and emotional in nature. Ideas as well as feelings had to be

reordered. Comte's search for a consensus derived not only from the anarchy of the post-revolutionary period but also from the instability in his own life, which led him to view inner harmony as a sign of health.

Comte's book '*Cours de philosophie positive*' (1830–42) established sociology as a distinctive discipline. He criticised what he called the 'negative' philosophy developed by eighteenth-century individualistic philosophers such as Kant and Hume. In his view, they had destroyed rather than provided the foundations for social order and social consensus. The 'essential aim of practical politics', he wrote, is 'to avoid the violent revolutions which spring from obstacles opposed to the progress of civilisation'.

From the beginning, the *Cours* set itself the task of social reorganisation: for Comte, 'true science' was nothing less than 'the establishment of intellectual order, which is the basis of every other order'. Comte defined sociology as a science based on the theory of the law of three stages and hierarchical classification of the sciences. Both of these concepts had been stated by previous writers – notably Turgot, Condorcet and Saint-Simon – but it was Comte who systematised these arguments, tracing the evolution of the sciences in great detail.

The *Cours* highlighted the history of science, which Comte believed was the most neglected and important part of the development of humanity. The *Cours* outlined Comte's famous 'classification of the sciences' and his equally renowned 'law of three stages.' This law demonstrated that as the mind went from one mode of thinking to another, it generated a different theoretical system, which in turn shaped the political and social system. There were three stages of development which were:

- The theological
- The metaphysical
- The positive.

The theological stage

In the theological stage, people used supernatural ideas, such as God, to link their observations. In a theological society, priests and military men ruled. According to Comte, in the theological state, the human mind seeks origins and final causes, analysing all phenomena as the result of supernatural forces; feelings and imagination predominate. The theory of divine right was the reigning political doctrine, while conquest was the principal material activity. (There were three phases of this stage: fetishism, where gods were located in phenomena, polytheism, and monotheism.) Comte divided the theological state into three separate periods of:

- fetishism (nature defined in terms of man's feelings)
- polytheism (a multitude of gods and spirits)
- monotheism (the existence of one God and the gradual awakening of human reason with its constraint on the imagination).

For Comte, each stage and sub-stage of evolution necessarily develops out of the preceding one: for example, the final sub-stage of monotheism prepares the way for the metaphysical stage in which human thought is dominated by abstract concepts, essences and ideal forms.

Metaphysical stage,

In the transitional, metaphysical stage, God was replaced by a personified essence or abstraction, like Nature or Reason. Lawyers and metaphysicians dominated society. The doctrines of popular sovereignty and natural rights were important in politics. More material activities were geared toward production.

Positive stage

Finally, in the positive stage, supernatural and abstract forces would be replaced by scientific laws describing how, not why, phenomena functioned. The positive phase characterizes the most advanced stage of social progress, dominated by a new and higher form of science, 'social physics' that permits the organization and management of society as a whole.

Industrialists and positive philosophers would run the republic. Production would replace conquest as the goal of society. He notes this final stage of evolution in which human thought abandons belief in essences or pure ideas such as absolute truth, but rather attempts to discover laws that link different facts together, through the methods of observation and experiment; absolute notions of causes are abandoned, and the emphasis shifts to the study of facts.

From the descriptions above, we can see that Comte's theory concerns the evolution of ideas. Science and sociology evolve out of previous developments. Comte took the view that every science develops in exactly the same way, passing through the separate stages of the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. In the evolution of science, astronomy develops first, followed by physics, chemistry, biology and sociology. Each science develops only on the basis of its predecessors; there is a hierarchical framework dominated by the law of increasing complexity and decreasing generality. He then created positivism and its keystone, sociology, to construct a new cohesive society that

would encompass the conservatives' call for order and the leftists' preference for progress.

Sociology is particularly dependent on its immediate predecessor in the hierarchy – biology. The science of biology is basically holistic in character, beginning not from isolated elements, as in chemistry and physics, but from organic wholes and systems. In Comte's view, the holistic approach taken by sociology can be attributed to the fact that it developed from biology. Sociology studies society as a whole: namely, society defined as a social system.¹ Sociology thus investigates the actions and reactions of the various parts of the social system. Individual elements must be analysed in their relation to the whole, in their mutual relation and in combination. As with biological organisms, society forms a complex unit irreducible to its component parts: Comte makes the important point that society cannot be decomposed into individuals any more than 'a geometric surface can be decomposed into lines, or a line into a point'. Thus, to gain knowledge of the parts, it is essential to examine the whole. Society was defined by Comte, therefore, as a collective organism characterised by a harmony between its individual parts and whole. The analogy between biology and sociology is constantly reiterated. Comte therefore took sociology from an organismic perspective and argued that:

...in biology, we may decompose structure anatomically into *elements*, *tissues* and *organs*. We have the same things in the social organism...forms of social power correspond to the *tissue*...the *element*...is supplied by the family, which is more completely the germ of society than the cell or fibre of the body...*organs* can only be *cities* the root of the word being the nucleus of the term civilisation.

There are a large number of students in the various disciplines in other Universities who learn about sociology. We should not forget those who are pursuing political science, economics, education, law and just to mention a few. Health science students learning this discipline for instance have a great advantage of gaining fresh insights and practical benefits in their personal lives and professional practices. Sociology along with other sisterly disciplines such as anthropology, economics, social psychology, human/ cultural geography, history and political sciences has now become an essential component of the health and medical sciences curricula in universities and other training institutions abroad.

Following this example, similar institutions in Zambia like Nhrumah and Mulungushi University have also included this course in their curricula. Specifically, the main learning objective of introduction to sociology is to familiarize the students with the basic ideas, issues, concepts and principles of sociology. Students will be able to describe the meaning, scope, methods, history and importance of sociology, and its relations to other disciplines. The

students will also be able to appreciate the relevance of sociology in their personal and future professional practice.

CHAPTER TWO- INTRODUCTION

Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define the term sociology;
- Describe the subject-matter, scope and basic concerns of sociology;
- Understand how sociology emerged and developed;
- Appreciate the personal and professional benefits derived from learning sociology;
- Understand the methods and approaches of sociology;
- Describe macro-sociology and micro-sociology;
- Appreciate the various views and concepts formulated by the founding fathers of sociology;
- Describe the relationship of sociology with other fields of study; and
- Appreciate the application of sociology in addressing contemporary societal problems.

1.1. Definition and Subject Matter of Sociology

What is Sociology?

Before attempting to define what **sociology** is, let us look at what the popular conceptions of the discipline seem. As may be the case with other sciences, sociology is often misconceived among the populace. Though many may rightly and grossly surmise that sociology is about people, some think that it is all about “helping the unfortunate and doing welfare work, while others think that sociology is the same as socialism and is a means of bringing revolution to our schools and colleges” (Nobbs, Hine and Flemming, 1978:1).

The first social scientist **to use** the term **sociology** was a Frenchman by the name of Auguste Comte who lived from 1798-1857. As coined by Comte, the term *sociology* is a combination of two words. The first part of the term is a Latin, *socius*- that may variously mean *society*, *association*, *togetherness* or *companionship*. The other word, *logos*, is of Greek origin. It literally means *to speak about* or *word*. However, the term is generally understood as *study* or *science* (Indrani, 1998). Thus, the etymological, literal definition of *sociology* is that it is *the word or speaking about society*. A simple definition *here* is that it is the study of **society**, **social interaction** and **culture**.

Box 1.1. A simple definition of sociology

Sociology is the study of society. Although the term “sociology” was first used by the French social philosopher August Comte, the discipline was more firmly established by such theorists as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber (Nobbs et al, 1978).

Before going any further, let us note that the concepts “society” and “culture” are central in sociology. While each concept shall be dealt with later in some detail, it appears to be appropriate here to help students differentiate between these two important concepts. Society generally refers to the social world with all its structures, institutions, organizations, 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 as culture (Stockard, 1997).

Box 1.2. Distinguishing between society and culture

Society: a group of people who live within some type of bounded territory and who share a common way of life

Culture: is common way of life shared by a society or a group.

Now, turning to the definitional issues, it is important that in addition to this etymological definition of the term, we need to have other substantive definitions. Thus, sociology may be generally defined as a social science that studies such kinds of phenomena as:

- The structure and function of society as a system;
- The nature, complexity and contents of human social behavior;
- 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.

A more formal definition of sociology may be that it is a social science which studies the processes and patterns of human individual and group interaction, the forms of organization of social groups, the relationship among them, and group influences on individual behavior, and *vice versa*, and the interaction between one social group and the other (Team of Experts, 2000).

Sociology is the scientific study of society, which is interested in the study of social relationship between people in 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 relationship and interactions; the /influence of the social world on the individuals, and *vice versa* (Team of Experts, 2000). It deals with a factually observable subject matter, depends upon empirical research, and involves attempts to formulate theories and generalizations that will make sense of facts (Giddens, 1982).

Regarding the detective and expository nature the science, Soroka (1992:34) states that “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.”

Generally speaking, the founders or the pioneering sociologists that have contributed to much of what we conceptualise in sociology according to Henslin and Nelson (1995) Giddens (1996) and Macionis (1997) are Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Hebert Spencer, Max Weber and Harriet Martineau.

Comte was the first social philosopher to coin and use the term sociology (Nobbs, Hine and Flemming, 1978). He was also the first to regard himself as a sociologist. He defined sociology as the scientific study of social dynamics and social static. He argued that sociology can and should study society and social phenomena following the pattern and procedures of the natural science. Comte believed that a theoretical science of society and the systematic investigation of human behavior were needed to improve society. He argued that the new science of society could and should make a critical contribution towards a new and improved human society. 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 the social order and those elements of society and social phenomena which tend to persist and relatively permanent, defying change.

Karl Marx (German, 1818-1883) was a world-renowned social philosopher, sociologist and economic historian. He made remarkable contributions to the development of various social sciences including sociology. He contributed greatly to sociological ideas. He introduced key concepts in sociology like **social class**, **social class conflict**, social oppression, **alienation**, **proletariat**, **bourgeois** etc. Marx, like Comte, argued that people should make active efforts to bring about societal reforms. According to Marx, economic forces are the keys to underestimating society and social change. He believed that the history of human society has been that of **class conflict**. He dreamed of, and worked hard towards realizing, a classless society, one in which there will be no exploitation and oppression of one class by another, and wherein all individuals will work according to their abilities and receive according to their

needs. Marx introduced one of the major perspectives in sociology, called **social conflict theory** (Macionis, 1997).

Harriet Martineau, British Sociologist (1802- 1876) lived at a time when women were greatly stereotyped and denied access to influential socio-political and academic arena, it is interesting to have a female academic to be numbered among the pioneering sociologists. Harriet was interested in social issues and studied both in the United States and England. She came across with the writings of Comte and read them. She was an active advocate of the abolition of slavery and she wrote on many crosscutting issues such as racial and gender relations, and she traveled widely. She helped popularize the ideas and writings of Comte by translating them into English (Henslin and Nelson, 1995).

Herbert Spencer, British Social Philosopher, (1820-1903) was a prominent social philosopher of the 19th century. He was famous for the organic analogy of human society. He viewed society as an organic system, having its own structure and functioning in ways analogous to the biological system. Spencer's ideas of the evolution of human society from the lowest ("barbarism") to highest form ("civilized") according to fixed laws were famous. It was called "**Social Darwinism**", which is analogous to the biological evolutionary model. Social Darwinism is the attempt to apply by analogy the evolutionary theories of plant and animal development to the explanation of human society and social phenomena (Team of Experts, 2000).

Emile Durkheim, French Sociologist, (1858-1917) was the most influential scholar in the academic and theoretical development of sociology. He laid down some of the fundamental principles, methods, concepts and theories of sociology; he defined sociology as the study of **social facts**. According to him, there are social facts, which are distinct from biological and psychological facts. By social facts, he meant the patterns of behavior that characterize a social group in a given society. They should be studied objectively. The job of a sociologist, therefore, is to uncover social facts and then to explain them using other social facts. Some regard Durkheim as the first sociologist to apply statistical methods to the study of social phenomena (Macionis, 1997; Clahoun, *et al*, 1994).

Max Weber, German Sociologist (1864-1920) was another prominent social scientist. According to him, sociology is the scientific study of human **social action**. Social action refers to any "action oriented to influence or influenced by another person or persons. It is not necessary for more than one person to be physically present for action to be regarded as social action...." (Team of Experts, 2000). It is concerned with the interpretive understanding of human social action and the meaning people attach to their own actions and behaviors and those of others. Weber was a renowned scholar who like Marx, wrote in several academic fields. He agreed with much Marxian theses but did not accept his idea that economic forces are central to social change. Weber argues

that we cannot understand human behavior by just looking at statistics. Every activity and behavior of people needs to be interpreted. He argued that a sociologist must aim at what are called **subjective meanings**, the ways in which people interpret their own behavior or the meanings people attach their own behavior (Henslin and Nelson, 1995; Rosneberg, 1987).

Box 1.3. Pioneering founders of sociology

August Comte, French, 1798-1857; key concepts: social static and social dynamic.

Karl Marx, German, (1818-1883), key concepts: class conflict, alienation, historical materialism, etc

Emile Durkheim, French, 1858-1917; key concept: social fact

Max Weber, German, 1864-1920; key concepts: social action; subjective meanings

Herbert Spencer, British, 1820-1903; key concept: social Darwinism.

Harriet Martineau, British, 1802-1876; active advocate of abolition of slavery and gender issues.

1.1.3. Levels of Sociological Analysis and Fields of Specializations in Sociology

There are generally three levels of analysis in sociology, which may also be regarded as branches of sociology: **micro-sociology**, **meso sociology** and **macro- sociology**. Micro-sociology is interested in small-scale level of the structure and functioning of human social groups; whereas meso sociology and macro-sociology study the medium to large-scale aspects of society respectively. Macro-sociology focuses on the broad features of society. The goal of macro-sociology is to examine the large-scale social phenomena that determine how **social groups** are organized and positioned within the **social structure**. The goal of meso sociology is to examine the medium social phenomena that determine how not too big and not too small **social groups** are organized and positioned within the **social structure**. Micro-sociological level of analysis on the other hand focuses on **social interaction**. It analyzes interpersonal relationships, and on what people do and how they behave when they interact. This level of analysis is usually employed by **symbolic interactionist perspective**.

Reflecting their particular academic interest sociologists may prefer one form of analysis to the other; but all levels of analysis are useful and necessary for a fuller understanding of social life in society.

Box 1.4. Levels of analysis in sociology

Micro-sociology: Analyzing small scale social phenomena

Macro-sociology: analyzing large-scale social phenomena

Meso-sociology: analysis of social phenomena in between the micro- and macro- levels.

Within these general frameworks, sociology may be divided into specific sub-fields on the basis of certain criteria. The most important fields of sociology can be grouped into six areas (*World Book Encyclopedia*, 1994: Vol. 18; Pp. 564-568).

- a) **The Field of Social Organization and Theory of Social Order:** focuses on institutions and groups, their formation and change, manner of functioning, relation to individuals and to each other.
- b) **Social Control:** Focuses on the ways in which members of a society influence one another so as to maintain social order.
- c) **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.
- d) **Social Processes:** Focuses on the pattern in which social change takes place, and the modes of such processes.
- e) **Social Groups:** Focuses on how social groups are formed, structured, and how they function and change.
- f) **Social Problems:** Focuses 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.

Currently, sociology has got quite several specific subdivisions or fields of specialization in it: some of these include the following: criminology; demography; human ecology; political sociology; medical sociology; sociology of the family; sociology of sports; sociology of development; social psychology; socio- linguistics; sociology of education; sociology of religion; sociology of knowledge; sociology of art; sociology of science and technology; sociology of law; urban sociology; rural sociology; economic sociology; and industrial sociology.

Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology Four Major Perspectives in Sociology

Sociologists analyze social phenomena at different levels and from different perspectives. Sociology as science employs perspectives or theories to understand, explain, analyze and interpret social phenomena cutting across the micro level, meso level and macro levels of social patterns and social facts. To interpret social facts, they must be subjected to a theoretical framework. A theory may be defined as a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work (Macionis, 1997). Scupin and DeCorse (1995) define a theory as a set of interconnected hypotheses that offer general explanations for natural or social phenomena.

It should also be noted that the terms “perspectives” and “schools of thought” are often used interchangeably with the term “theory”.

There are four major theoretical perspectives in sociology (though others consider only three) that have provided an overall framework for sociological studies. These are structuralism (which is not considered as one) **structural functionalism**, social **conflict theory** and **symbolic interactionism**. There are also theories that have emerged challenging these major ones (you will see below).

The Structural-Functionalist Theory

This is one of the dominant theories both in anthropology and sociology. It is sometimes called functionalism. The theory tries to explain how the relationships among the parts of society are created and how these parts are functional (meaning having beneficial consequences to the individual and the society) and dysfunctional (meaning having negative consequences). It focuses on consensus, social order, structure and function in society.

The structural-functionalist theory sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability; it states that our social lives are guided by **social structure**, which are relatively stable patterns of social behavior (Macionis, 1997). Social structure is understood in terms of **social function**, which are consequences for the operations of society. All social structure contributes to the operation of society. The major terms and concepts developed by anthropologists and sociologists in this theory include (or the theory focuses on): order, structure, function (manifest or direct functions and latent or hidden, indirect functions), and equilibrium. Those hold this view ask such questions as: what hold society together? What keeps it steady? The Structural functionalist theory pays considerable attention to the persistence of shared ideas in society. The functional aspect in the structural-functionalist theory stresses the role played by each component part in the

social system, whereas the structural perspective suggests an image of society wherein individuals are constrained by the social forces, social backgrounds and by group memberships.

Many of the great early founding sociologists such as August Comte, Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer and later American sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Robert K Merton. Structural -functionalist theorists in modern sociology are more likely to follow in the tradition of the writings of particularly Emile Durkheim, who is regarded as the pioneering proponent of this perspective (Henslin and Nelson, 1995). After dominating sociology and anthropology for a long time, this theory was challenged by its main critics, notably those who proposed the social –conflict theory (*see below*). The theory was attacked for its emphasis on stability and order while neglecting conflict and changes which so vital in any society.

The Social Conflict Theory

This theory is also called Marxism; to indicate that the main impetus to the theory derives from the writings of Karl Marx. This theory sees society in a framework of class conflicts and focuses on the struggle for scarce resources by different groups in a given society. It asks such questions as what pulls society apart. How does society change? The theory holds that the most important aspect of social order is the domination of some group by others, that actual or potential conflicts are always present in society. The writings of Karl Marx are generally in the spirit of conflict theory, and Marxism influences most of conflict theorists in modern sociology.

The theory is useful in explaining how the dominant groups use their power to exploit the less powerful groups in society. Key concepts developed in this perspective include: conflict, complementation, struggle, power, inequality, and exploitation. Although this theory gained fame in recent decades, it came under sharp criticism, for its overemphasis on inequality and division, for neglecting the fact of how shared values and interdependence generate unity among members of society; it is also criticized for its explicit political goals. Another critique, which equally, applies also to structural functionalism, is that it sees society in very broad terms, neglecting micro-level social realities (Macdonis 1997).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective on self and society based on the ideas of George H. Mead (1934), Charles H. Cooley (1902), W. I. Thomas (1931), Herbert Blumer and other pragmatists associated, primarily, with the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century. The label symbolic interactionism was coined by Herbert Blumer (1969), one of Mead's students. The central theme of symbolic interactionism is that human life is lived in the

symbolic domain. Symbols are culturally derived social objects having shared meanings that are created and maintained in social interaction. Through language and communication, symbols provide the means by which reality is constructed. Reality is primarily a social product, and all that is humanly consequential—self, mind, society, culture—emerges from and is dependent on symbolic interactions for its existence. Even the physical environment is relevant to human conduct *mainly* as it is interpreted through symbolic systems.

This perspective views symbols as the basis of social life. Symbols are things to which we attach meanings. The theory stresses the analysis of how our behaviors depend on how we define others and ourselves. It concentrates on process, rather than structure, and keeps the individual actor at the center. According to symbolic interactionism, the essence of social life and social reality is the active human being trying to make sense of social situations. In short, this theory calls attention to the detailed, person-oriented processes that take place within the larger units of social life (Calhoun *et al*, 1994; Henslin and Nelson, 1996; Soroka, 1995).

Meaning and interaction

Because of its canonical status in the social sciences, it is not necessary to discuss symbolic interactionism in detail here. The most salient points for my aims were stated succinctly by Herbert Blumer in the book that introduced and defined symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969: p. 2-5):

- 1) 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings which these things have for them.'
- 2) 'The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing.'
- 3) 'The use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation.'

I will refer to these principles as Blumer's statements 1 to 3. According to these principles, human beings are involved in a dynamic process of interaction and construction of meaning (interpretation). It addresses a classic problem in sociology and anthropology, viz., classification as a social activity or product, which was introduced in sociology by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (Durkheim and Mauss 1903). In contrast to the latter, symbolic interactionism claims that meaning should be studied at the level of interacting individuals rather than at the societal level: a micro-approach. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism claims that individuals are (at least to some extent) free to interpret the meaning of the interaction that they witness, which allows for variation in responses to action and events. The principles of symbolic interaction are highly relevant to the processes in literary criticism that I have

investigated. Blumer's statements can be applied to my research topic in the following way.

- 1) 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings which these things have for them.'
- 2) The things that I investigate are literary texts: magazine articles, books, or entire body of works. The meanings that are central to my research are classifications according to literary style and literary quality that authors and critics attribute to their peers' work.
- 3) 'The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing.'

In my research the persons are literary authors and critics. They act toward each other with regard to literary texts when they cooperate, e.g., being editors for the same literary magazine or publishing at the same publishing house, or when they publish reviews and comments on each other's work. The acts are hypothesized to affect meaning, i.e., the style group to which the author's work is attributed and the perceived artistic quality or valence of the author's work. The two types of constructed meaning – classification and value judgement – were published in reviews and essays by the authors, critics, and scholars involved at that time. They can be considered representative for meanings as they were constructed there and then. 'The use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation.'

Content analyzing reviews and coding literary classifications and evaluations of literary quality, the researcher inevitably interprets meanings. It is important, however, to note that the researcher is interpreting interpretations; literary critics and authors acknowledge that interpretation is central to reviewing and defining literary style groups or movements. Because we may safely assume that interpretation links acts to judgements and classifications, I do not refer much to Blumer's third statement in the rest of this paper. It is worth pointing out that the same books could and sometimes were reviewed positively by some but negatively by others. In addition, highly overlapping sets of authors received different style names. The freedom of interpretation postulated in symbolic interactionism is clearly at work here and they are registered as adequately as possible by the researcher. In addition to the interpretation of the books, I expect that authors and critics assign meaning to patterns of interaction (cf. Blumer's second statement) and general social attributes of their peers as well. This is an implicit and unintended kind of interpretation, which nevertheless surfaces in the names of some style groups, e.g., Feminist Literature or Revisor Prose (*Revisor* being the name of a literary magazine). In this way, overall social structure, which is emphasized in structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 2008), can be incorporated in the analyses.