How We Got Here: Crash Course Sociology #12

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=BsRSL3duSko
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/BsRSL3duSko

Until about 12 thousand years ago, the largest group of people ever assembled, the most humans ever gathered in one place was probably a crowd of about a hundred. Tops.

And there were somewhere between one and ten million people on the entire planet back then.

Today, we have football stadiums that can fit a hundred people, a thousand times over.

The city of Shanghai has a population of over 24 million. And there are almost 7.5 billion people on earth.

How the heck did we get from there to here? That might sound like a History question, and it is, partly. But it's also a Sociology question.

Because if we wanna understand how we got from small groups, huddled around a fire, to cities of millions, we need to understand what society is, and how societies changed as their populations grow.

And we need to understand how different kinds of societies shape the people who live in them.

Pretty much any question you can ask about society, you can answer with the help of Sociology.

As long as there have been humans, there have been societies. We're social animals, and even when there were mere hand fulls of us, we grouped together, forming the first societies.

Now, society can mean lots of different things. A few families, who spend all their time hunting deer and picking mushrooms, can be a society.

But so are the 70 million people of the Roman Empire. And so are the 1.2 billion people living in India today.

So, we need a definition that's going to include all of this things. And, conveniently enough, we have one.

A society is simply a group of people who share a culture and a territory.

That's a good definition, but it doesn't really tell us much about the different kinds of societies. Or how we get from one kind to another.

For that, we turn to the work of American sociologist, Gerhard Lenski. Lenski focused on technology as the main source of societal change, trough a process he called Sociocultural Evolution. The changes that occur as a society gains new technology.

Lenski then broke up human History into five different types of societies, defined by the technology the used, and the social organizations that the technology helped create and sustain.

If you look back to early human history, say about 30 to 40 thousand years ago, you find a lot of what Lenski called Hunting and Gathering societies.

In these societies people made use of extremely basic tools, to help them hunt animals and gather wild plants for food.

Now, if you think about how much you eat in a day, and imagine trying to gather up that much food, every day, it should be pretty clear that this is no easy task.

So, food was the major concern in these societies. And they still exist today.

People in Hunting and Gathering societies spend almost all their time trying to make sure they have enough food. And they're nomadic, following migrating animals, and wild harvests, so they don't build permanent settlements.

So, by their very nature, these societies tend to be small. Hunting and Gathering can't support a group of more than 25 to 40 people, effectively.

And, in order for Hunting and Gathering to support even that, everyone has to work to find food, and everyone has to share their resources, in order to assure the survival of the group.

This means that these societies have very low inequalities. For the vast majority of human history, every single person lived in Hunting and Gathering societies.

Up until about 12 thousand years ago, when the domestication of plants and animals lead to new kinds of society. Horticultural and pastoral societies.

Pastoral societies are based around the domestication of animals, and are also nomadic, moving from place to place, to keep their herds fed.

Horticultural societies, on the other hand, are based on cultivating plants. So, with horticultural societies we see the first human settlements, as groups began to stay put to remain close to reliable sources of food.

And we also see, for the first time, the accumulation of material surplus, that is, more resources than are needed to feed the population.

This is incredibly important because having a surplus allows society to grow. And it also means that not everyone needs to work on getting food and simply surviving.

This, in turn, leads to the first real instances of specialization in society. With separate political, religious, and military roles coming about.

We also get real social inequality for the first time. And this same dynamic accelerates as we move into Agrarian society. As permanent settlements emerge based around agricultural production.

Starting about five thousand years ago, with better farming techniques, like the animal drawing plow, we get more food production, and an even bigger material surplus.

From this, came larger populations and larger settlements, with even more specialization, and even more inequality.

Remember serfs and nobles? Feudalism was an Agrarian society. And you know what else happens when societies reach this point? The family starts to become less important.

In other kinds of societies, things like education are handled almost entirely by the family. But as societies grow and become more complex, those functions start to be taken up by larger social institutions, like the church or schools.

And now, we finally start approaching present-day America, with Industrial societies. These societies get their start with the Industrial Revolution around 1750.

As production began to shift from human and animal power, to machine power. This had a massive impact on food production, with new technologies like the tractor and the combine producing huge surpluses that could support even larger populations with even more specialization.

But the Industrial Revolution also marked a fundamental change in the organization of society itself.

Societies far larger than anything seen before meant a greater need to assert centralized control over everything. From the production of goods, to transportation, to agricultural production. In order to keep things running smoothly.

For the first time, human society moved away from a subsistence-based economy. As mass production became possible, a capital-based economy emerged.

As the surplus grew, and specialization increased, so did inequality. With factory workers spending 12-hour days, on one end, and incredibly wealthy captains of industry making enormous profits, on the other.

It's no coincidence that soon after the Industrial Revolution, Marxism and Conflict Theory emerged.

And the decreasing importance of the family continued as well. As more institutions stepped into traditional family roles.

Industrial societies were the first to have universal public education, for instance. And, for the first time, the majority of health care and caregiving were institutionalized, done outside the home in hospitals.

The need to keep production organized also meant an increasingly urbanized population. Because it's easier to control the resources you need if they're centralized.

So, people moved from the countryside to urban centres, were the industrial jobs were. And all of this keeps going in Lenski's scheme of things. With specialization and technological innovation continuing until the development of the computer.

A technology that gave rise to the Postindustrial society. In Postindustrial societies we still see specialization, increased urbanization, and technological advances.

But, the defining change is that Postindustrial societies shift away from an economy based on raw materials and manufacturing, to an economy based on information, services, and technology.

This is how we got here. If you look at the most dynamic sectors of the US economy, you see massive wealth being created in tech, finance, and service industries, but a steady decline in manufacturing.

That said, it's not as though Americans don't buy stuff. Apps can do a lot of things, but they can't, yet, conjure a car out of the ether for you.

So, this is a good chance to point out that these different types of society aren't isolated from each other. You can't have a Postindustrial society without having Industrial societies elsewhere, to supply it with goods.

This points again to increasing inequality, not just within one society, but across societies.

So, in Lenski's understanding, societal change is driven by technological change. But, it's worth pointing out that not all of these changes are beneficial.

Polution, global warming, and large scale warfare are new problems that technology has brought us. And technology doesn't solve fundamental societal problems.

It has the potential to reorganize society, but technology can't tell us how to have peaceful or just societies. In fact, as looking at Lenski's classifications, you can see that advance in technology, also advances inequality in society, making it increasingly unequal.

So, we can't limit our discussion of society to just looking at technology. But that's okay, because the sociocultural changes that Lenski talks about, can also be understood using the work of some old friends. Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

Marx, for example, might seem pretty similar to Lenski at first. If you think back to his theory of Historical Materialism, he certainly seems to put a strong focus on technology and the economy, as the driving forces of history.

Remember, he saw that changes in the forces of production are important in pushing the change from one mode of production to another.

But, for Marx, you only get large scale social change through class struggle, which culminates in a revolution, overthrowing the old relations of production, and replacing them with an entirely new set.

So, in Marx's view, the transition between Lenski's stages requires technological change, but it also requires revolution.

And we can also use Marx's understanding of conflict to compare Lesnki's stages with each other.

In Hunting and Gathering societies, for example, conflict and inequality are levelled by the lack of surplus, and the need to share resources. But that's not the case in Postindustrial society.

Max Weber, for his part, seems further away from Lenski than Marx, focusing not on technology, or revolution, but on ideas.

The major transition that Weber talked about was the shift from Traditional to Modern society. Which he argued was really a matter of rationalization.

Now, it's not that Weber didn't appreciate the importance of technology, but he argued that the transition from Agrarian to Industrial society, for instance, began with a shift in ideas.

Like, new techniques in accounting, and ways of approaching social organization. And it was these ideas, combined with advances in technology that produced the overall change.

So, in this view, both ideas and technology were crucial for the emergence of modern Capitalism.

And Durkheim, finally, took a different tap from either Marx or Weber. He approached the transitions that Lenski talked about from the perspective of a societies' underlying social structures.

Specifically, Durkheim saw the history of society as a long-term change in solidarity. A change in what held societies together.

He argued that Hunting and Gathering societies were held together by similarity, what he called Mechanical Solidarity.

Durkheim argued that everyone in these societies had the same

skills, and lived in, basically, the same way. But that changed as society developed, and specialization increased.

With more specialization, people became more differentiated, taking on different jobs, learning different skills, and living in different ways.

But, Durkheim argued, people also became more tightly integrated because they became more interdependent. Factory workers needed farmers to make food, so that they could eat. And farmers needed factory workers to make their tools, and other goods.

Durkheim called this interdependence Organic Solidarity.

And, so, Lenski's sociocultural evolution is, for Durkheim, the story of a long transition from Mechanical to Organic Solidarity.

Ultimately, all of these ways of looking at society, and its changes, from the point of view of technology, or conflict and revolution, or ideas, or underlying social structure are important for understanding what society is, and how it works.

Each one of these perspectives sees things that the others miss, and each one is important for the discipline of Sociology.

Today we learned about the society, what it is, and how it changes. We talked about Gerhard Lenski's classification of societies and the five types. And the technological changes that turn one into another.

We returned to Marx and Weber, and talked about how they understood societal change. And, we also talked about Durkheim's understanding of society, and how social solidarity can be Mechanical or Organic.

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