

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

Sociology Optional

Sociology - The Discipline

Paper 1 · Unit 1

Why sociology could only have been born in nineteenth century Europe, what its boundaries are against the neighbouring social sciences, and the distinction between sociological and common sense knowledge that examiners return to every second year.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

(a) Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology. (b) Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences. (c) Sociology and common sense.

The Triple Revolution: Why Sociology Appeared When and Where It Did

Sociology is not a timeless human curiosity about society. Societies had been described by Ibn Khaldun, Kautilya and Montesquieu long before 1838. What was new in nineteenth century Europe was that society itself became visible as an object: something separable from nature, from God's will, and from the state, and therefore something that could be studied and reformed. Three convulsions made it visible.

- The standard exam framing is the 'triple revolution': the Enlightenment (intellectual), the Industrial Revolution (economic), and the French Revolution of 1789 (political). Sociology is the discipline that emerged in the space these three tore open.
- The common thread: each revolution destroyed a taken-for-granted order. So long as the social order looked natural or divinely given, there was nothing to explain. Once it visibly changed, and changed by human hands, it demanded explanation.
- Modernity's structural markers, which are what the syllabus means by 'social changes in Europe': industrialisation, urbanisation, the rise of capitalism, the nation state and bureaucracy, secularisation, the shift from ascription to achievement, and the growth of individualism.
- Tonnies captured the transition as *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*: community based on kinship, locality and natural will, giving way to association based on contract, calculation and rational will. Durkheim recast the same shift as mechanical to organic solidarity, driven by the division of labour and rising 'dynamic' or 'moral density'.
- The classical thinkers are best read as three answers to one question, 'what is modernity doing to us': for Marx it is capitalism and alienation, for Durkheim it is the division of labour and anomie, for Weber it is rationalisation and the iron cage of bureaucracy.
- Do not overstate the Europe-only claim. UPSC has asked precisely this (2021). Modernity's preconditions were global: colonial extraction financed European industry, and non-European intellectual traditions of social analysis long predate Comte. What Europe uniquely produced was sociology as an institutionalised academic discipline, not social thought as such. This postcolonial qualification, associated with Edward Said's *Orientalism* and later with Syed Farid Alatas on 'academic dependency' and Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory*, is where good answers earn marks.
- Institutionalisation followed later than the ideas: Durkheim took Europe's first chair explicitly linked to the subject at Bordeaux in the 1890s and founded *L'Année Sociologique* in 1898; the *American Journal of Sociology* began in 1895 and the Chicago department in 1892. Note the pattern the 2013 PYQ points at: sociology was conceived in Europe as a theoretical science of order, but grew in the USA with a reformist, empirical, problem-solving orientation.

KEY TERMS

Modernity — The social formation produced by industrial capitalism, the nation state and secular rationalism, marked by a break with tradition as a source of authority.

Gemeinschaft / Gesellschaft — Tonnies' contrast between community bound by natural will, kinship and sentiment, and association bound by rational will, contract and self-interest.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Sociology is the product of European enlightenment and renaissance. Critically examine this statement. [2024]
- Discuss the historical antecedents of the emergence of sociology as a discipline. [2019]
- 'Sociology is pre-eminently study of modern society.' Discuss. [2016]
- Europe was the first and the only place where modernity emerged. Comment. [2021]
- 'Sociology emerged in Europe and flourished to begin with on social reformist orientation in the U.S.A.' Comment. [2013]
- How did the emergence of industrial society change family life in Western Europe? [2014]

The Enlightenment: Reason as the Solvent of Tradition

The Enlightenment gave sociology its nerve: the conviction that society is a natural object, obeying discoverable laws, and therefore open to reform rather than endurance. Without that conviction, a science of society is a category error.

- Core Enlightenment commitments that sociology inherited: reason over revelation, empiricism over scripture, the idea of progress, universalism, and a belief that human institutions are man-made and therefore alterable.
- Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) is the closest thing to a sociological ancestor: he treated laws and customs as varying systematically with climate, terrain, population and religion, and he used a typology of governments. This is comparative method and something close to ideal types, before either had a name.
- The Scottish Enlightenment mattered as much as the French. Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) analysed the division of labour and its moral costs; Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) gave the division of labour its canonical treatment. Durkheim's 1893 thesis is in direct conversation with both.
- Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) supplied the stadial idea of history moving through stages toward perfectibility, which Comte converted into the Law of Three Stages.
- The Enlightenment's method was the decisive bequest: applying the methods of natural science, which had just triumphed with Newton, to the human world. Sociology begins as an attempt to be the Newtonian physics of society.
- The critical qualification: the Enlightenment supplied the ambition, not the discipline. It was philosophical, speculative and often ahistorical. Sociology needed the empirical discipline of the nineteenth century, and it needed a problem, which the Industrial and French Revolutions provided.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What aspects of Enlightenment do you think paved way for the emergence of sociology? Elaborate. [2022]
- How had enlightenment contributed to the emergence of Sociology? [2015]
- How did the Intellectual forces lead to the emergence of Sociology? Discuss. [2020]
- Explain how sociology has emerged as a distinct discipline based on rationality and scientific temper. [2017]

The Industrial Revolution: The Making of the 'Social Question'

Industrialisation did not merely change how goods were made. It produced a visible mass of human suffering that could not be blamed on nature, fate or sin, and that no existing institution could account for. That surplus

of unexplained misery is the 'social question', and sociology is one of the answers to it.

- The structural changes: factory production, wage labour, the separation of the household from the workplace, urbanisation, and the emergence of two visible classes.
- The separation of home and work is the hinge for the family question (2014 PYQ). The pre-industrial family was a unit of production; the industrial family became a unit of consumption. Consequences: a narrowing toward the nuclear form, geographical and social mobility loosening the extended kin network, the shift of production out of the home and the ideological construction of a female 'private' domestic sphere, and the state gradually absorbing functions such as education, health and social security.
- Talcott Parsons later theorised this as the family losing functions but not losing importance: it becomes structurally isolated and specialises in two 'basic and irreducible' functions, the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities. Note the qualification: Michael Anderson's work on Preston showed that extended kin ties persisted and were even strengthened as a survival strategy under early industrialism, and Peter Laslett's Cambridge Group demolished the assumption that the pre-industrial English family was typically extended.
- Empirical social survey work grew out of this question, not out of theory: Frederic Le Play's family budget studies in Europe, and in Britain Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* and B.S. Rowntree's poverty study of York. This is the empirical tributary that later joined the theoretical stream from Comte.
- Note the divergent diagnoses, which is what comparison questions want: Marx read industrial misery as exploitation rooted in the mode of production, curable only by transforming property relations. Durkheim read it as a moral pathology, the abnormal forms of the division of labour, curable by occupational corporations and moral regulation. Weber read industrial capitalism as the institutional carrier of rationalisation, and offered no cure at all.

KEY TERMS

Anomie — Durkheim's term for normlessness: a condition in which social norms fail to regulate individual aspirations, produced by rapid social change.

The French Revolution and the Conservative Reaction: The Problem of Order

This is the section most aspirants underplay. Sociology is not simply the child of the Enlightenment; it is equally the child of the reaction against the Enlightenment. Robert Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition* (1966) is the standard reference: sociology's core concepts were conservative concepts, put to non-conservative use.

- 1789 proved that a social order could be dismantled by deliberate human action. That is liberating and terrifying in equal measure, and it converts 'how is social order possible' from a philosophical puzzle into an urgent practical question.
- The conservative reaction, led by Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre, attacked the Enlightenment for atomising society. They insisted society is prior to the individual, that it is an organic whole not an aggregate, and that tradition, religion, hierarchy and community are not superstitions but load-bearing walls.
- Nisbet's 'unit ideas' of sociology are precisely the conservatives' preoccupations, secularised: community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation. Each is defined against its Enlightenment counterpart: society, power, class, the secular, and progress.

- This is why sociology's founding fathers are politically hard to classify. Comte took the conservatives' organicism and their horror of disorder, but rejected their remedy of returning to the past; his motto 'Order and Progress' is an explicit attempt to fuse the two camps. Durkheim's entire corpus, on solidarity, on religion as society worshipping itself, on the need for moral regulation, is Bonald's problem answered with Enlightenment tools.
- The exam-useful formulation: the Enlightenment gave sociology its method and its faith in reform; the conservative reaction gave sociology its subject matter, the reality of society as a thing sui generis. The discipline exists in the tension between them.
- Marx is the exception that proves the point. He accepted neither the conservative diagnosis nor Comte's reconciliation, and read 1789 as a bourgeois revolution that replaced one class order with another rather than solving the problem of order.

Auguste Comte and the Naming of Sociology

Comte is examined less for the truth of his system, almost none of which survived, than for what he founded: the name, the positivist programme, and the claim that society can be studied by the methods of natural science. Get the attribution details exactly right here, because they are cheap marks and expensive errors.

- Comte coined 'sociology' in 1838, in volume 4 of his *Cours de philosophie positive* (published 1830 to 1842). He had earlier called the project 'social physics' and abandoned the term after the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet appropriated it for his statistical work on the 'average man'.
- The word is a hybrid of the Latin *socius* (companion, associate) and the Greek *logos* (study, reason). Comte was mocked for the philological barbarism, and he knew it, and he used it anyway.
- He was secretary to and student of Henri de Saint-Simon, who had already argued for a scientific study of society; the disputed intellectual inheritance is why some texts call Saint-Simon the real founder. Attribute the coinage to Comte, the conception to both.
- The Law of Three Stages: human thought, and therefore society, passes through the theological stage (explanation by supernatural agency, subdivided into fetishism, polytheism, monotheism), the metaphysical stage (explanation by abstract forces such as Nature or Reason, a transitional stage), and the positive or scientific stage (explanation by observed laws of succession and resemblance, abandoning the search for first and final causes).
- The Hierarchy of Sciences: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology. The order runs from greatest generality and simplicity and earliest positivity, to least generality and greatest complexity and latest positivity. Sociology arrives last because it is hardest, and it sits at the apex as the 'queen of the sciences'.
- Comte divided sociology into social statics, the study of order, of the conditions of coexistence and consensus, and social dynamics, the study of progress, of the laws of succession. His motto, 'Order and Progress', is inscribed on the flag of Brazil, a Comtean legacy.
- Comte's four methods for sociology: observation, experiment, comparison, and the historical method, which he considered the distinctively sociological one.
- Comte's positivism thus means three things at once, and answers should separate them: an epistemology (only observable, verifiable knowledge counts), a methodology (apply natural science method to society), and a philosophy of history (the three stages). Only the first two survive into Durkheim.
- The honest verdict: Comte's later phase, the Religion of Humanity, with himself as high priest, a calendar of secular saints and a positivist catechism, is why T.H. Huxley called positivism 'Catholicism minus

Christianity'. His grand law is unfalsifiable and his sociology is armchair speculation. His importance is programmatic, not substantive: it took Durkheim to actually do what Comte announced.

KEY TERMS

Positivism — Comte's doctrine that genuine knowledge derives only from sense experience and its logical treatment, and that society can be studied by the observational methods of natural science to yield general laws.

Social statics / social dynamics — Comte's division of sociology into the study of the conditions of social order and the study of the laws of social change.

The Scope of Sociology: Formalistic vs Synthetic Schools

'What is the scope of sociology' is a live exam question (2025, 2022, 2021) and it has a definite academic answer: two rival schools, one wanting sociology to be narrow and pure, the other wanting it broad and general. Answer the question by naming the debate, not by listing definitions.

- The Formalistic (or Specialistic) School: Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Leopold von Wiese, Alfred Vierkandt, and in a qualified sense Max Weber. Sociology should be a pure and independent science with a limited scope, studying only the forms of social relationships, abstracted from their contents.
- Simmel's core move: sociation (Vergesellschaftung) has forms such as conflict, competition, subordination, superordination, the division of labour, and these forms recur across utterly different contents. Conflict has the same formal properties in a marriage, a market and a war. Sociology is geometry to the other social sciences' physics: it studies the shape, they study the stuff.
- Von Wiese classified some 650 forms of human relationships; Vierkandt held sociology should study the mental or psychic relationships binding people together. Tönnies' Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is itself a formal typology.
- The Synthetic School: Emile Durkheim, L.T. Hobhouse, Pitirim Sorokin, Morris Ginsberg, and Karl Mannheim. Sociology is a general science of society that synthesises the findings of the special social sciences, because social life is a whole and cannot be carved at the joints without distortion.
- Durkheim's version of the scope: sociology divides into social morphology (the substratum: population, its volume and density, territorial distribution), social physiology (the special sociologies of religion, morals, law, economy, language), and general sociology (the formulation of general social laws, the philosophical part).
- Sorokin's version: sociology studies the relationships and correlations between different classes of social phenomena, for instance between the economic and the religious, and the general characteristics common to all classes of social phenomena. Ginsberg: sociology studies human interactions and interrelations, their conditions and consequences.
- The evaluation, which is where marks are: the formalists secure sociology's independence but at the price of triviality, since a form with no content is empty, and Sorokin's objection stands, that you cannot study forms without content any more than you can study a container while ignoring what it holds. The synthetic school captures social life realistically but risks making sociology an undisciplined 'science of everything', with no boundary of its own.
- The working resolution most departments actually adopt: sociology's distinctiveness is not a unique subject matter but a unique perspective. Every social science studies the same human beings; sociology asks what is social about them, that is, how their conduct is patterned by group life, structure and shared meaning. This is the point to make when a question says 'delimit' (2022) or 'unique' (2025).

- The contemporary twist the 2021 and 2017 questions invite: the boundaries are dissolving. Behavioural economics, political sociology, historical sociology, social psychology and cultural studies are all border traffic. Argue that the traffic is a sign of health, not of scope creep, while insisting the sociological question remains distinct.

KEY TERMS

Sociation — Simmel's term for the process by which individuals enter into reciprocal relations, whose recurring forms are sociology's proper object.

Social morphology — Durkheim's term for the study of the material substratum of society: the volume, density and territorial arrangement of the population.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- In what way is the scope of sociology unique? Explain. [2025]
- Delimit the scope of Sociology in relation to other social sciences. [2022]
- From the viewpoint of growing importance of multidisciplinary, how do you relate sociology to other social sciences? [2021]
- Discuss the changing equations of discipline of Sociology with other social sciences. [2017]
- In the context of globalization, has the scope of Sociology been changing in India? Comment. [2020]

Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

The examiner is not asking you to list similarities and differences. The examiner is asking whether you understand that the social sciences differ by question asked, not by object studied. All of them study the same human beings. What differs is the cut.

- **Sociology and Economics:** economics, on Lionel Robbins' definition, studies the allocation of scarce means among alternative ends, and abstracts a rational, utility-maximising 'economic man'. Sociology treats economic action as embedded in social relations. Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) argued the self-regulating market was a historical anomaly that had to be politically constructed, and that the economy is normally embedded in society. Mark Granovetter's 'Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness' (1985) attacked both the undersocialised conception of economics and the oversocialised conception in some sociology, and showed with 'The Strength of Weak Ties' (1973) that jobs travel through acquaintance networks, not through price signals. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904 to 1905) is the classic demonstration that a religious ethic can shape economic conduct: the exact inversion of economic determinism.
- **Sociology and Political Science:** political science classically studies the state, government, formal institutions and constitutions, that is, power where it is licensed. Sociology studies power wherever it operates, in the family, the caste panchayat, the office, the classroom, and asks about the social bases of political behaviour. Weber's definition of the state, in 'Politics as a Vocation' (1919), as the human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory, is itself a sociological definition: it turns on legitimacy, which is a belief, not a statute. Political sociology, and the elite theories of Mosca, Michels and Pareto, occupy the overlap.
- **Sociology and History:** Wilhelm Windelband's 1894 distinction is the tool to reach for. History is idiographic, concerned with the particular, the unique and the once-occurring; sociology is nomothetic, seeking generalisations and law-like regularities. History asks what happened; sociology asks what kinds of

things happen. History works from documents and archives, sociology adds survey, observation and interview, and can study the living. The overlap is now the most productive frontier in the discipline: Philip Abrams' *Historical Sociology* (1982) argued the two are indistinguishable in principle, since both study the structuring of action over time. Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979) are historical sociology at full strength. Marx's historical materialism and Weber's comparative studies of world religions are unclassifiable as either.

- **Sociology and Anthropology:** the classical division was of labour and of territory, not of logic. Social anthropology studied small-scale, pre-literate, technologically simple, relatively homogeneous, usually colonised societies, holistically, through long immersive fieldwork after Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Sociology studied large-scale, literate, complex, usually Western societies, through surveys and statistics. E.E. Evans-Pritchard held plainly that social anthropology is a branch of sociology. The division has collapsed: anthropologists now study laboratories, stock exchanges and their own cities, and sociologists routinely do ethnography. In India the distinction never held: G.S. Ghurye trained under W.H.R. Rivers at Cambridge, M.N. Srinivas trained under Ghurye and then under Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard at Oxford, and Srinivas' *The Remembered Village* is ethnography written by the country's most eminent sociologist. Cultural anthropology in the American tradition, after Boas, is a further distinct strand, as is physical anthropology, which is not a social science at all.
- **Sociology and Psychology:** psychology studies the individual organism, its mind, perception, learning, personality and behaviour. Sociology studies the group and the patterned relations between individuals. The battle line is Durkheim's rule in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895): 'The determining cause of a social fact must be sought among antecedent social facts, and not among the states of the individual consciousness.' *Suicide* (1897) is the demonstration: he took the most private, most apparently psychological act imaginable and showed that its rate is stable, patterned, and explained by social integration and regulation, not by individual despair. The opposing position exists and should be named: George Homans, in 'Bringing Men Back In' (1964), argued that sociological propositions must ultimately be derived from psychological propositions about individual behaviour. Social psychology, and G.H. Mead's account of the self arising through interaction, occupies the bridge, and shows the boundary is analytical rather than real.
- The formulation that wins the 2014 question on approach: for a psychologist, the question about a suicide is why this person; for a sociologist, the question is why this rate, and why this group rather than that one. Same event, different unit of analysis, different kind of answer. Neither is wrong.
- The concluding line for any of these questions: the boundaries are administrative conveniences of the nineteenth century university, not natural joints in reality. Defend sociology's distinctiveness as a perspective, concede the overlap as fertile, and cite the border disciplines by name.

Sociology against its neighbours: the cut each discipline makes

Discipline	Its characteristic question	Unit of analysis	How sociology differs	The overlap
Economics	How are scarce means allocated among alternative ends?	The rational, utility-maximising individual or firm	Treats economic action as embedded in social relations, norms and networks, not as asocial calculation	Economic sociology: Polanyi's embeddedness, Granovetter's networks, Weber's Protestant Ethic
Political Science	How is the state organised and how is authority exercised through it?	The state, government, formal institutions	Studies power wherever it operates, including family, caste and workplace, and asks about the social bases of political behaviour	Political sociology: Weber on legitimacy, elite theories of Pareto, Mosca and Michels
History	What happened, in this place, at this time?	The unique, particular event (idiographic)	Seeks generalisation and recurrent patterns across cases (nomothetic); can study the living, not only the archive	Historical sociology: Abrams, Barrington Moore, Skocpol; Marx and Weber are both
Anthropology	How does this whole way of life hang together, from the inside?	The small-scale, relatively homogeneous community	Classically studied large, complex, literate societies by survey and statistics; the division was of territory and technique, not of logic	Ethnography is now common to both; in India the distinction never held (Ghurye, Srinivas)
Psychology	Why does this individual think, feel and act as they do?	The individual mind and organism	Explains social facts by antecedent social facts, not by states of individual consciousness (Durkheim's rule); asks about rates, not cases	Social psychology; Mead on the social genesis of the self; Homans' reductionist counter-argument

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Discuss the nature of Sociology. Highlight its relationship with Social Anthropology. [2024]
- What is the relationship (similarities and differences) between sociology and history in terms of their area of study and methodology? [2025]
- Discuss the relationship between sociology and political science. [2023]
- How is Sociological approach to human actions different from that of psychological approach? [2014]
- Compare and contrast Sociology with Anthropology. [2013]

Sociology and Common Sense

This has been asked in 2025, 2023, 2021, 2018 and 2016. It is the single most predictable topic in the unit, and it is also where weak answers are most obvious, because the standard answer, 'common sense is unscientific and sociology is scientific', is both thin and partly false. The sophisticated position is that the two differ in their rules, not merely in their accuracy.

- Common sense is the stock of taken-for-granted, unexamined knowledge that members of a society use to navigate everyday life. It is practical, local, unreflective, acquired through socialisation rather than inquiry, and it is not required to be consistent.

- Zygmunt Bauman's *Thinking Sociologically* (1990, later with Tim May) gives the four differences worth reproducing, and they are the backbone of a good answer. First, responsible speech: sociology submits to rules of evidence, method and public scrutiny, and must show its workings; common sense answers to no one. Second, the size of the field: sociology draws on a far wider canvas than the individual's own biography and immediate experience. Third, sense-making: sociology explains conduct through webs of interdependence and structural position, whereas common sense explains it through individual intentions, motives and character. Fourth, defamiliarisation: sociology disturbs the familiar, common sense confirms it.
- The third of those is the most useful in an answer because it names the real defect. Common sense is individualistic and naturalistic: it explains poverty by laziness, unemployment by lack of ambition, caste by tradition, crime by bad character. Sociology asks why the rate varies across groups and periods, which no theory of individual character can explain. C. Wright Mills' distinction between personal troubles and public issues is exactly this move.
- Durkheim's version is harsher and is worth quoting in *Rules of Sociological Method* terms: prenotions (praenotiones) must be systematically eradicated before inquiry begins. Borrowing Bacon's language of idola, Durkheim treated common sense not as a starting point but as an obstacle, a set of crude, self-flattering ideas that stand between the observer and the fact. The first rule is to treat social facts as things, and the first corollary is to discard all preconceptions.
- Common sense is not merely unproven; it is contradictory, and this is the killer illustration. 'Birds of a feather flock together' and 'opposites attract' are both common sense. 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder' and 'out of sight, out of mind' are both common sense. A body of knowledge that supplies a proverb for every outcome predicts nothing, and can never be wrong. Duncan Watts' *Everything Is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer* (2011) presses this point: common sense explains after the fact and therefore feels obvious, while explaining nothing in advance.
- The concession that separates a good answer from an average one, and which the 2023 question demands: common sense can be true, and it is often the starting point of research. It is a legitimate source of hypotheses, it identifies what a society finds problematic, and it gives the researcher entry into the world being studied. Its defect is not falsity but its epistemic status: it is untested, and it is not organised to be testable. Sociology's job is to convert common sense propositions into testable ones, and then to accept whatever comes back.
- The deepest point, and the one that reverses the whole relationship: for some sociologies, common sense is not a rival to be defeated but the very object of study. Alfred Schutz analysed the natural attitude, typifications and the 'stock of knowledge at hand' as the phenomenological bedrock of social life. Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology treats members' common sense reasoning as its topic rather than as a resource to be corrected, and his breaching experiments work precisely by violating the unnoticed common sense rules that make interaction possible. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) makes common sense knowledge the central subject of the sociology of knowledge, on the ground that it is the knowledge that actually constitutes the reality people inhabit.
- Anthony Giddens' double hermeneutic completes the picture and is the most sophisticated point available here: unlike molecules, the people sociologists study have their own common sense theories about what they are doing, so the sociologist must interpret an already-interpreted world. Worse and more interestingly, sociological concepts leak back out and become common sense, at which point they change the behaviour they described. 'Charisma', 'lifestyle', 'role model' and 'peer group' all began as technical terms. Common sense and sociology are therefore not two sealed containers; they exchange contents.

- The 2018 question's framing, that sociology's focal point is interaction, points at the symbolic interactionist answer: common sense knowledge is what makes interaction possible, and sociology's task is to make explicit the rules that participants follow without being able to state them.
- The safest structure for this question: define both, give the differences (rules of speech, breadth of evidence, mode of explanation, defamiliarisation, cumulative revision), then concede the overlap (common sense as hypothesis source, as object of study, as the double hermeneutic), then conclude that sociology is not common sense with better manners but a discipline that makes common sense answerable to evidence.

KEY TERMS

Prenotions — Durkheim's term for the crude, pre-scientific ideas about social life that observers bring with them and must eradicate before inquiry can begin.

Defamiliarisation — Bauman's term for sociology's effect of rendering the taken-for-granted strange, so that it becomes visible and questionable.

Double hermeneutic — Giddens' term for the two-way interpretation in social science: the sociologist interprets a world already interpreted by its members, and sociological concepts then re-enter and reshape that world.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What is common sense? How are common knowledge and sociology related to each other? [2025]
- Do you think that common sense is the starting point of social research? What are its advantages and limitations? Explain. [2023]
- How is Sociology related to common sense? [2021]
- The focal point of Sociology rests on interaction. How do you distinguish it from common sense? [2018]
- Is sociology common sense? Give reasons in support of your argument. [2016]

The Sociological Imagination: Mills' Bridge

C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) is the most quotable single source in this unit, and it does double duty: it answers the common sense question and the scope question at once. Keep it for your conclusions.

- The sociological imagination is the capacity to grasp the intersection of biography and history within society, and to see the relations between the two.
- Its signature distinction: personal troubles of milieu versus public issues of social structure. One man unemployed in a city of 100,000 is a trouble, and you look to his character and skills. Fifteen million unemployed in a nation of fifty million is an issue, and no account of individual character can touch it. The same logic transfers to divorce, to farmer suicides, to caste discrimination.
- Mills' three orienting questions for any society: what is its structure and how do its components relate; where does it stand in human history and what are the mechanics of its change; what varieties of men and women prevail in it, and what is being done to them by it.
- Mills wrote it as a polemic against the two dominant tendencies of American sociology in his day: Parsons' 'grand theory', abstract systems with no empirical bite, and Lazarsfeld's 'abstracted empiricism', technically flawless research on questions of no consequence. This is why the book belongs in the methodology unit as well.
- The 2018 question quotes Mills directly, so learn the formulation: the imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. Note that this is also a scope claim:

sociology's territory is exactly the joint where the personal meets the structural, which is territory no other social science claims.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relationship between the two in a society. C.W. Mills. Explain. [2018]

Last-mile revision

- Sociology is the child of the triple revolution: Enlightenment (method and faith in reform), Industrial Revolution (the social question), French Revolution (the problem of order).
- Nisbet: the Enlightenment gave sociology its tools, the conservative reaction (Bonald, de Maistre) gave it its subject matter, the reality of society as sui generis. Sociology lives in that tension.
- Comte coined 'sociology' in 1838 in volume 4 of Cours de philosophie positive, after abandoning 'social physics' to Quetelet. Latin socius plus Greek logos. Saint-Simon was his mentor.
- Comte: Law of Three Stages (theological, metaphysical, positive); Hierarchy of Sciences (maths, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology) by decreasing generality and increasing complexity; social statics and dynamics; motto 'Order and Progress'; four methods (observation, experiment, comparison, historical).
- Scope: Formalistic school (Simmel, Tonnies, von Wiese, Vierkandt) wants pure forms of sociation; Synthetic school (Durkheim, Hobhouse, Sorokin, Ginsberg) wants a general science of society. Sorokin's objection: you cannot study form without content.
- Durkheim's divisions of sociology: social morphology, social physiology, general sociology.
- Sociology's distinctiveness is a perspective, not a unique object. Every social science studies the same humans; sociology asks what is social about their conduct.
- History is idiographic, sociology nomothetic (Windelband, 1894). Historical sociology (Abrams, Moore, Skocpol) dissolves the line.
- Durkheim's rule: the determining cause of a social fact must be sought among antecedent social facts, not among states of individual consciousness. Homans ('Bringing Men Back In', 1964) argues the reductionist opposite.
- Evans-Pritchard: social anthropology is a branch of sociology. In India the distinction never held (Ghurye under Rivers; Srinivas under Ghurye then Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard).
- Common sense vs sociology, Bauman's four: responsible speech, size of the field, mode of sense-making (interdependence vs intention), defamiliarisation.
- Common sense is contradictory ('birds of a feather' vs 'opposites attract'), so it explains everything after the fact and predicts nothing (Watts).
- But: common sense is a legitimate hypothesis source, and for Schutz, Garfinkel, and Berger and Luckmann it is the object of study, not the enemy. Giddens' double hermeneutic: sociological concepts leak back into common sense.
- Mills: personal troubles of milieu vs public issues of social structure; biography meets history; written against Parsons' grand theory and Lazarsfeld's abstracted empiricism.

Common errors to avoid

- Writing that Comte 'founded sociology in 1839' or 'coined the term in 1839'. The coinage is 1838, in volume 4 of the Cours. Also do not credit the coinage to Saint-Simon; credit him with the conception.
- Calling Comte's original term 'social physiology' or attributing 'social physics' to Durkheim. Comte used 'social physics' first and dropped it because Quetelet took it. 'Social physiology' is Durkheim's term for a division of sociology, which is a different thing entirely.
- Reversing the Hierarchy of Sciences, or claiming sociology is at the top because it is the most general. It is at the apex because it is the most complex and least general, and therefore the last to reach positivity.
- Treating sociology as purely a child of the Enlightenment and ignoring the conservative reaction. Nisbet's argument that sociology's unit ideas are conservative ideas is exactly what 'critically examine' invites in the 2024 question.
- Answering 'Europe was the first and only place where modernity emerged' with a flat yes. The postcolonial qualification (colonial extraction financed industrialisation; Said, Alatas, Connell) is the mark-scoring content.
- Answering the common sense question with only 'sociology is scientific, common sense is not'. Without the concessions (hypothesis source, object of study for Schutz and Garfinkel, the double hermeneutic) the answer stays in the average band.
- Confusing the Formalistic and Synthetic schools' membership. Simmel is a formalist; Durkheim and Sorokin are synthetic. Sorokin is the one who criticised the formalists for separating form from content, so he cannot be listed among them.
- Muddling nomothetic and idiographic. Nomothetic is law-seeking (sociology), idiographic is the particular (history). The terms are Windelband's, not Weber's, though Weber's neo-Kantian formation runs through Windelband and Rickert.
- Listing differences between sociology and other social sciences as a table with no argument. The examiner wants the thesis that they differ by question and perspective, not by object, plus the border disciplines named.